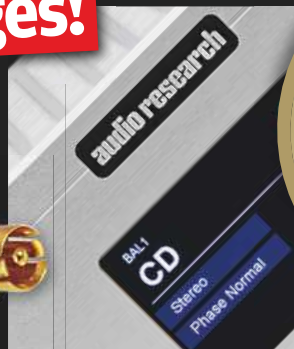


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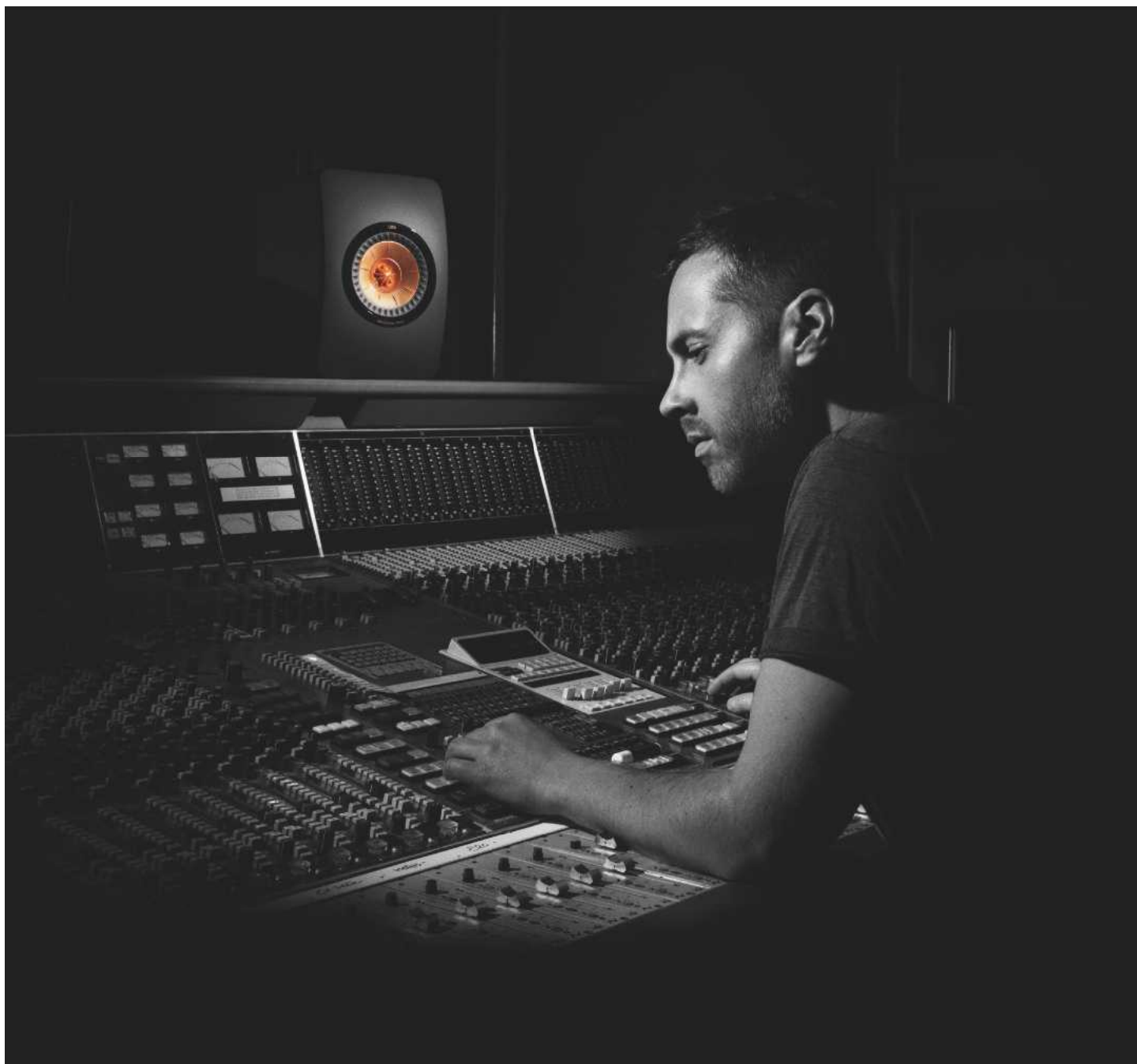


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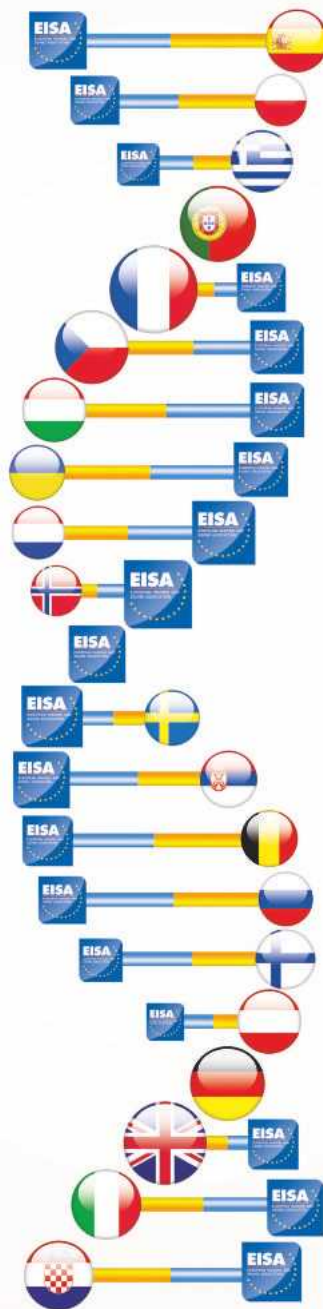
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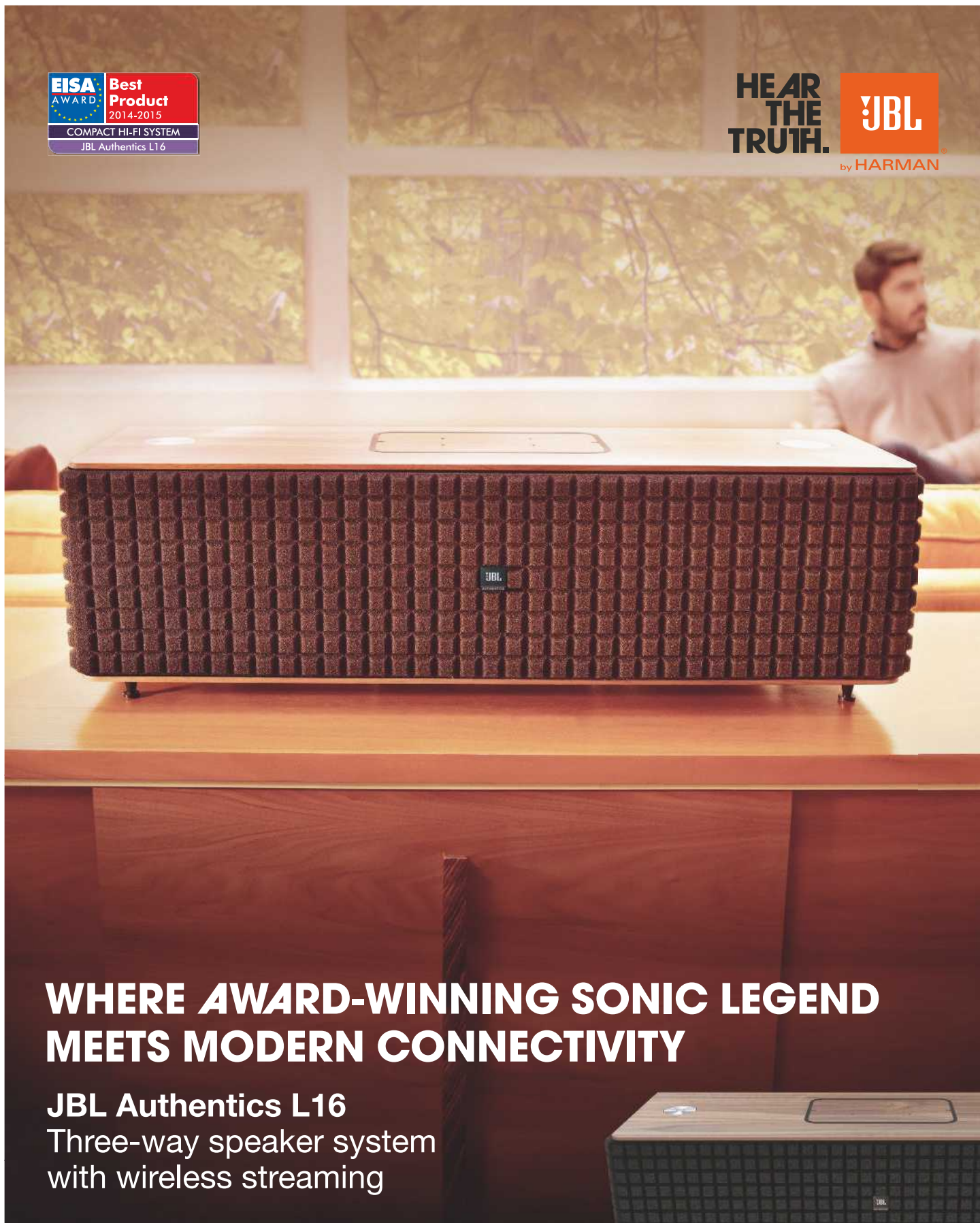
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Along with a series of models paying homage to the great luthiers of Cremona, the company has since been inspired by the Teatro Olimpica in Vicenza. It is appropriate that this new family of speakers considered the standards of a famed venue as the ne plus ultra of the reproduction of music with vivacity and power...exactly what defines music from opera to orchestral to rock music to soul to jazz. To achieve this, Sonus faber has exploited all that it has learned since its inception.

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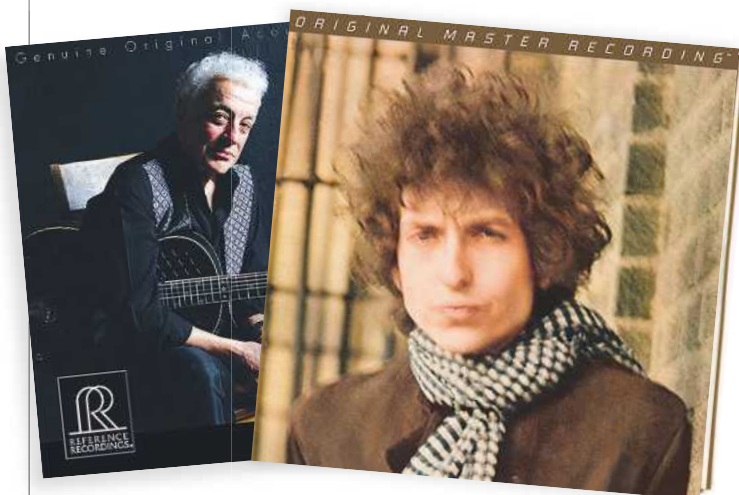
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YEARBOOK/14



ABOVE: Vinyl art, Brinkmann-style, with the Balance 2 turntable (p24)

RIGHT: Audio Research spins up a storm with its CD6 DAC/ player combo on p38



MUSIC: Bob Dylan's *Blonde On Blonde*, is reissued on three heavyweight 45rpm LPs (p138) while Doug MacLeod's *There's A Time* brings the blues to life with a 176.4kHz/24-bit download (p142)

RIGHT: *Hi-Fi News & RR* is the exclusive UK representative of EISA's Hi-Fi Expert Group and editor Paul Miller is EISA's Hi-Fi Expert Group Manager

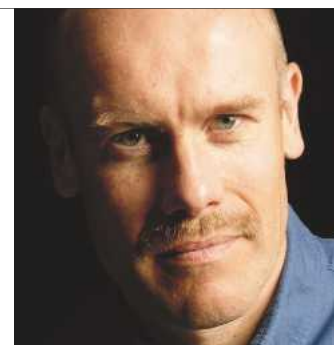


Welcome, audiophiles, enthusiasts and music lovers all to our annual Yearbook. Christmas has come a little early this year as *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* celebrates the hardware that turned our heads and the music that stirred our souls throughout 2014.

Hungry for the best that hi-fi has to offer? Well, prepare to be sated because this bumper 172-page issue is a feast of audio dreams, a menu of the most delectable source components, amplifiers and loudspeakers from across the globe. We've more than a few vintage audio heroes on show to remind us of hi-fi's deep roots together with selections from our Budget Esoterica series, proving there's some very affordable hardware ready and eager to tempt our musical tastebuds.

While the choice of equipment grows by the year, 2014 has also demonstrated new ways we can enjoy music on the hoof. Listening to our favourite albums without being tied to the sofa, and without demolishing audio quality, has become a movement in itself.

The explosion in lightweight outboard USB DACs, many of them hub-powered, has released music files from the prison of the laptop. The best of them are also



able to drive the most esoteric of headphones, even if these still rank as indoor headgear.

We also have new hi-fi media players that offer both USB, compatible with super hi-res DXD and DSD files, and Ethernet connections to access a world of music. At the same time turntables and the heavyweight LP also continue to flourish in this

'Join us on Nov 1-2 as our Yearbook pages come alive with music'

virtual world. We've never had so many different turntable designs grace our Yearbook.

So why not join us on 1st-2nd November at our high-end Hi-Fi Show in Windsor as our Yearbook pages come alive with music and you can witness many of these fabulous products in action. It's not too late to purchase advance tickets via www.eventbrite.co.uk (search for The Hi-Fi Show 2014) or see www.hifinews.co.uk/show for more details.

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Wilson Audio's director of sales Peter McGrath (left) and Absolute Sounds' Ricardo Franassovici with Wilson Alexia



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USA, Las Vegas – CES

HI-FI NEWS SHOWBLOG

One of the advantages of being the oldest hi-fi magazine in the world is that we've had time to station our reporters in audiophile hot spots across the globe, eager to file stories from the biggest shows. Every month we offer our Showblog from a major international event somewhere in the world including CES in Las Vegas, and the High End Show in Munich through to the annual shows in Russia, Hong Kong and Sweden in addition to our very own *Hi-Fi News* show in Windsor [see p16 and p126]. Our Showblogs provide a unique glimpse of the world's newest and tastiest hi-fi, all from the comfort of your armchair!



Graaf, better known for its audiophile tube amps, celebrated its 30th anniversary with a solid-state power amplifier. The GM 400 boasts numerous innovations, not least a design that is 'free from all well-known shortcomings affecting transistor amplifiers'. Rated power is 210W/8ohm with the first 10W delivered in Class A. It sounded grand with Rosso Fiorentino floorstanders. www.graaf.it



Seen here with T+A's chief engineer Lothar Wiemann are the company's new additions to its EISA Award-winning HV series. The P 3000 HV preamp is joined by the 2x300W A 3000 HV power amp, operable in 380W mono mode and upgradable with the PS 3000 HV PSU! www.ta-hifi.com



A longstanding gentlemen's agreement between Michell Engineering and Germany's Transrotor has stalled the distribution of the latter's comprehensive turntable range in the UK. Nevertheless, Transrotor had much to shout about, launching four new turntables from the €4000 belt-driven Dark Star to the plush Orion Reference pictured here with SME arm. The deck features a non-contact magnetic drive. www.transrotor.de



Seen with the fabulous Absolare Passion 845 tube amps was this huge turntable, dubbed 'The Beat' from Kodo in the USA. It uses a three-phase synchronous motor as part of a 'MagDrive' with 'no direct mechanical contact between the motor and the platter'. Price in the UK is £24,995. www.xactaudio.com



Developed in Taiwan, the HANT-1 is the world's first two-way AMT-equipped headphone. Bass and midrange are handled by a relatively conventional 57mm dynamic driver (with neodymium magnet) while the Air Motion Transformer takes over to stretch its response up to a claimed 45kHz. Impedance is 56ohm and UK price is £1500. www.obravo-global.com

UK, Windsor – Hi-Fi Show



Peter Madnick, the 'director' of the Constellation Audio design project that involves a who's-who of audio engineers, poses next to the Californian marque's Virgo line preamplifier [see *HFN* July '13]. It was Constellation's Centaur 500W monoblocks that drove the Magico S5 floorstanders to immense sound pressure levels in the demonstration room. www.constellationaudio.com

Using several B&W loudspeakers including the imposing 800Ds, Musical Fidelity impressed all-comers with its M8 preamp and 700W M8700m mono power amps [see *HFN* Jan '13]. The firm's M6 CD and M6 DAC were used as the system's primary source. Meanwhile, B&W's compact 805s were driven by MF's 'pure Class A' AMS35i integrated amplifier to make a system ideal for smaller listening rooms. www.musicalfidelity.com



Wilson Audio's director of sales Peter McGrath (left) and Absolute Sounds' Ricardo Franassovici flank the Wilson Alexia floorstander featuring technology from the awesome Alexandria XLF. It sounded sublime driven by D'Agostino Momentum amps with an ARC REF CD9 player/DAC at the front end. Wilson Audio's new Duette Series II 'bookshelf' monitor also made its UK debut. www.absolutesounds.com



In the Focal/Naim room Mark Tucker, general manager of Focal-JMLab UK, posed for our camera next to the French speaker company's Grande Utopia EM. With its 40cm electromagnet bass driver it never fails to move listeners! It was driven by a trio of Naim NAP 500 amplifiers with an NDS network player source. www.focal.com; www.naimaudio.com



VTL's Luke Manley flew from California to demonstrate his high-end amps – including the first UK showing of the 'Signature' S-200. A Spiral Groove SG2 turntable with Centroid arm and Lyra Kleos MC fed a VTL TP-6.5 JFET/valve phono stage and TP-7.5 line preamp. Meanwhile, 450W MB-450III monoblocks drove Avalon Acoustics Compás floorstanders. www.kogaudio.com



As well as hosting live performances by Eleanor McEvoy, the PMC demonstration room featured seminars by world-renowned mastering engineer Crispin Murray, seen here standing next to PMC's latest fact.12 three-way floorstanders and awesome BB5 SE 'prosumer' monitors powered by Bryston electronics. www.pmc-speakers.com

Germany – Munich Show



Everyone drooled over the new Reference Series, but may have missed KEF's smaller version of its supersexy Blade. The Blade Two's cabinet is only slightly reduced at 1461x475x338mm (hwd) versus the original's 1590x540x363mm (see pic). Drivers are a Uni-Q with 25mm vented aluminium dome tweeter/125mm mid, plus four 165mm side-firing alloy woofers. Sensitivity is 90dB. www.kef.com



TechDAS' TDC01 Ti, is an extension of the TDC01 Reference MC launched at the Tokyo Show in Nov '13. Its egg-shaped body is fashioned from titanium and the cantilever is pure boron, tipped with a semi-line contact stylus. Weight is 17g while output is said to be 0.45mV. Loading is 100-200ohm. An electronic stylus gauge is included. www.techdas.jp

Audio Research showed three models in its all-new G (for Galileo) Series, inspired by its earliest models, including the D-150 amp and SP-3 pre, seen at the top. Priced below the Reference range, it consists of a GSPre preamp, GS150 stereo power amp (155W/ch) and the GSi75 integrated amplifier (75W/ch). The amps' output tubes are KT150s, two per channel in the integrated and four per channel in the GS150. www.audioresearch.com



Oppo showed its innovative PM-1 Planar Magnetic headphones together with the partnering HA-1 amplifier, shown here with the LCD displaying a pair of 'analogue meters'. Inside is an ESS9018 Sabre32 Reference DAC (used in its universal players), a stereo preamplifier, a digital audio dock for mobile devices, and facility for driving balanced 'phones. www.oppodigital.co.uk



Estelon's handsome Extreme were heard with power courtesy of Vitus Audio's 700W/ch MP-S201 Masterpiece Stereo Amplifier. The Extreme has a variable height of 1770-2070mm to contain its pair of 10in woofers, 10in aluminium mid-woofer, 7in ceramic inverted dome mid and 1.5in diamond tweeter. www.estelon.com; www.vitusaudio.com



Astell & Kern uprated its AK100 and AK120 digital players with a new look taken from the top-of-the-line AK240, and added II suffixes as well. The AK100 II has 64GB of internal memory and a single DAC while the AK120 II seen here has 128GB of memory and twin DACs. Both offer support for 5.6MHz DSD files. Balanced output features, too, plus there's an optional remote and cradle. www.astellnkern.com

Japan – Tokyo Audio Show



Loved Ortofon's cute little Ta-Q7 headphone amp, with a brace of 6N3s supplying its 2x5W per channel power. Ultra-simple: volume knob, 1/4in socket, a pair of RCAs for input and – what's this? – speaker terminals! Footprint is 127x210mm (wd), construction is jewel-like. We want one, but think it's Japan-only. www.ortofon.jp



Germany's Einstein Audio showed a prototype of its new integrated amp with LCD display. Dubbed The Tune, the amp promises a power output of 80W per channel and comes with touchscreen control. What's more, it's well-made and looks terrific, so enjoy the visual feast. www.einstein-audio.de



Flanked by 'Classic Series' Spondor SP100R²s, maintaining the true BBC spirit, Triode's fabulous TRX-M845 monoblocks (about £4500 each) sport 845s and are rated at 50W/8ohm. Dimensions are 580x300x440mm (whd) and the weight is a considerable 58kg. Also housed in the rack are the Junone Reference One preamp, and a selection of Triode amps – necessarily selective as the catalogue offers 35 different all-valve models. www.triode.co.jp

We've said this before, but you just have to love a speaker that looks like an Eames chair: Davone's Grande features luscious curved wood, beautiful lines, all wrapped around a 10in woofer, a 6.5in midrange and a 1in dome tweeter. Dimensions are 910x610x480mm (hwd) and even the stand looks Eames-ish. If you're gonna emulate... www.davoneaudio.com



Some companies thankfully still wave the SACD banner: Denon's new DCD-SX1 player unashamedly supports the format with an over-engineered beauty featuring the company's proprietary Advanced AL32 Processing, copper-clad innards (inspired by cousin Marantz?), and a price of circa £3300. The original DCD-SX remains at £5000. www.denon.com

As promised, TechDAS launched the Air Force Two, at roughly a third the price of the Air Force One. All of the features including air bearing and air suspension remain. Cost reduction was achieved through the use of a different material for the main chassis, and the introduction of a less complex suspension in each tower. Production samples should be shipping by the close of 2014. www.stella-inc.com



Portugal – The Audio Show



Gryphon Audio Designs wowed visitors with this fabulous system comprising a pair of its Trident II speakers, a Pandora pre and Mephisto power amp. UNICO's Rui Borges turntable saw analogue duty while MSB Technology's Diamond DAC crunched digits. The room was huge but the system filled it with sound without breaking a sweat. www.gryphon-audio.dk



Kronos Audio's Kronos turntable with its twin platters rotating in opposite directions was also a huge hit at the show. Those attending also had the pleasure of hearing the deck's designer, Louis Desjardins, explain the thinking and technological intricacies that went into the making of this truly striking turntable. www.kronosaudio.com



One system that worked supremely well saw a pair of Magico S5 loudspeakers combined with Constellation Audio's Centaur monoblocks, a Constellation Audio Virgo preamp and a Metronome Calypso transport/Metronome C5 Signature DAC. www.magico.net; www.metronome-technologie.com

There was no shortage of visitors to the Linn room where the Klimax Exakt DSM streamer could be heard with Klimax Exakt 350 speakers. Meanwhile, vinyl fans enjoyed a Linn LP12 Limited Edition turntable with Kandid cartridge via a Urika phono stage. www.linn.co.uk



Another component to debut at the event was the Nagra HD DAC. There were only two units in existence at the time and information was scarce, but representatives of the company were able to reveal that it employs AK DACs and that it accepts LPCM up to 24-bit/384kHz, plus DSD64 and 128. www.nagraaudio.com



These stout and sturdy-looking floorstanders are the Tenors from Swedish company Marten Audio's Coltrane series of loudspeakers. Amplification is from VTL in the form of its MB-450 II power amps and TL 7.5 II preamp. As for digital sources, EMM Labs' TSDX CD/SACD transport and DAC2X DAC took it in turns with Auralic's Lumin streamer. www.marten.se



Stockholm – High End Show

Elac showed the flagship in its four-strong 400 range of loudspeakers: the FS409. This three-and-a-half-way bass reflex design stands 120cm tall and features twin 180mm woofers below a 150mm midrange driver topped by JET 5 Air Motion Transformer tweeter. The FS409 is said to deliver down to 28Hz. www.elac.com



Vienna Acoustics drew the crowds with a somewhat less conventional-looking speaker – the Liszt – which will form part of the company's new Imperial series. All speakers in the planned line-up feature a new 15cm 'Flat-Spider-Cone' coincident driver system derived from the Klimt series. www.vienna-acoustics.com



The Dream, from Hesselvall Audio, is a single-ended auto bias triode integrated said to be 'a no feedback design' capable of 40W/ch from its twin beefy 6X4 tubes. Pure Class A in operation, it measures 295x470x585mm (hwd) and offers three line-ins. Driving Revolution speakers from Finland's Gradient, the sound was intimate and warm. Built to order, The Dream is available in the stove-black finish pictured or a striking red. www.hesselvallaudio.se

The Mimer from Swedish company Bladelius is a network media player and preamplifier and headphone amp in one neat box. Compatible with files up to 384kHz/32-bit, the Mimer supports streaming from NAS and USB devices, as well as Wimp and Spotify and is 'driven' via a generously large high-res touch screen. www.bladelius.com



The Swedish importer of Canton loudspeakers wanted to show off the full capabilities of the Reference 9.2 and Chrono SL 520.2 bookshelf models, so chose electronics from Esoteric in the form of A-80 monoblocks, a C-03 preamp and CD-K07 CD player. A less powerful Onkyo pre/power also gave good results. www.canton.de/en

Four well known Nordic exhibitors on the same carpet: Veteran HiFi with the Simply Black Magic turntable, Hesselvall with The Dream tube amplifier, Kimber cable from Nordic distributor Audio Connection, and a pair of Revolution speakers from Gradient. The Revolution is a two-part system with its 12in woofers housed in the lower module and separated from the midrange and tweeter in the upper head module. www.gradient.fi





Belt-driven turntable with electronic speed control, 10in and 12in arms
 Made by: Brinkmann Audio GmbH, Achberg, Germany
 Supplied by: Symmetry, Herts
 Telephone: 01727 865488
 Web: www.brinkmann-audio.com; www.symmetry-systems.co.uk
 Prices: £17,495 (deck), £2895 (tube PSU), £4195 (12.1 tonearm)

AUDIO
FILE



Brinkmann Balance 2

A masterpiece of stylish understatement, the flagship Balance 2 uses Brinkmann's Sinus motor and belt-drive system as a way to update the earlier Balance model.

The plinth is CNC-machined from aluminium and supports both arm bases plus the bearing; it sits on three spiked feet adjustable for levelling. The bearing is made of hardened stainless steel and rotates in sintered brass bushings, but it's unusual in that the assembly is heated by a MOSFET device in order to ensure the bearing operates at a steady temperature.

The 90mm platter is machined from a block of aluminium while a polished crystal glass mat is recessed into its top surface. A

an upgrade PSU (the RÖnt II) is available which uses valves.

The 12.1 arm was supplied with Brinkmann's £2495 open-bodied EMT-Ti cartridge. The alternative Brinkmann 10.0 arm, 'effectively a unipivot', has a miniature bearing mounted on a stainless steel tip for horizontal movement, although a second ceramic bearing lower down the shaft provides stability for the assembly. Vertical movement is provided by a second array of conventional bearings. We fitted an Ortofon Kontrapunkt B to the 10.0, a simple task as both 10.0 and 12.1 arms can be loosened for cartridge azimuth and VTA adjustment.

A WEALTH OF DETAIL

Starting with this pairing and the deck powered by the standard PSU we found the Brinkmann bringing to life things we'd previously been unaware of, with a sense of solidity, focus and scale

only hinted at by cheaper designs.

With The Eagles' 'Long Road Out Of Eden' [Universal] we were surprised by the way in which the bell that tolls quietly during the intro had real weight to its strikes. Usually this is very much something that lurks in the distance but the Balance 2 dragged it into the main action in an uncanny way.

Equally impressive was the Balance 2's rendering of

instruments, whether acoustic or electronic. The RÖnt II made some interesting changes to the sound, eg, the fretless bass in 'The Painter' from *Water Falls* [Stockfisch] seemed slightly out of proportion. Yet playing the song a second time though revealed it was simply allowing the deck to dig deeper into the texture of the notes, fleshing them out better.

A switch to the 12.1 tonearm with EMT-Ti proved to be something of an ear-opener too. The relative lack of soundstage width we had noted with the 10.0 arm was suddenly a faint memory since the Brinkmann now filled the width of the room with a superbly cavernous recreation of the recording studio.

The character of the music seemed to shift back a gear slightly, with the 12.1 having a more relaxed feeling to it, in contrast to the more up-front presentation offered by the 10.0. The EMT-Ti definitely added smoothness and a slightly more cerebral hint of authority, but it was never less than joyously musical.

On the other hand, it was the 12.1 tonearm responsible for the superb opening-up of the soundstage, and it could still rock with the best of them when later re-fitted with the Ortofon cartridge. We have found some 12in arms to be a little over-smooth, but the Brinkmann 12.1 strikes a very capable sonic balance and was thus our final preferred choice.

VERDICT

The Balance 2 offers both intelligent engineering and superb sound. Both tonearms tested offer their own slightly different takes on proceedings and can be used to fine-tune the end result, as can the addition of the RÖnt II PSU. ☺

ABOVE: The optional isolation platform seen here accommodates the turntable's component parts very effectively. The two Brinkmann arms are easily aligned with their adjustable mounting bases. The RÖnt II power supply uses PL36 valves to drive the motor

'The Brinkmann brought to life things that we were previously unaware of'

screw-down clamp presses the LP across this mirror-smooth mat.

The Sinus motor stands in its own pod and has exquisite touch controls for Off, 33.3 and 45rpm selection, with trim-pots to permit fine speed adjustment. The motor unit brings the 18kg platter up to speed in a relatively short time.

A neat transformer pack provides power for both the motor and the heated bearing assembly although

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.45rpm (+0.34%)
Time to audible stabilisation	7sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.01% / 0.03%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-68.3dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-71.5dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-62.6dB
Power Consumption	75W (65W idle)
Dimensions (WHD)	550x140x430mm

AUDIO FILE

Magnetically isolated, belt-drive turntable
Made by: Clearaudio Electronic GmbH, Germany
Supplied by: Sound Foundations, UK
Telephone: 01276 501392
Web: www.clearaudio.de; www.soundfoundations.co.uk
Prices: £14,500 (black, £15,400); tonearm £3350; stand £8000 (black, £8500)



Clearaudio Master Innovation

While the massive Statement continues as Clearaudio's very top model, below it in the hierarchy comes this spectacular and impressive new flagship for the main Innovation Series.

'Eric Clapton's vocals on Backless had presence and a gritty intensity'

It is built up on Clearaudio's familiar, elegant, three-lobed chassis members, each constructed as a sandwich, with a core of Panzerholz (an 'armour wood') between two sheets of aluminium. The Master Innovation is in fact built as two separate units with the proprietary multi-platter arrangement facilitating Clearaudio's magnetic contactless drive system.

The upper section is the turntable proper, with a 70mm-thick acrylic platter atop a 15mm stainless steel base platter. This runs on Clearaudio's Ceramic Magnetic Bearing, the platter effectively floating on a cushion of air.

Immediately below is the 40mm-thick platter belonging to the lower turntable section, forming the driving member of the system. Its function is purely to

provide contactless drive to the turntable system above. Its left hand front chassis pillar houses the DC motor, with control buttons for Off, 33.3, 45 and 78rpm.

Our Master Innovation came with the top pivoted 9in tonearm, the Universal; this beautifully-engineered arm uses miniature ballraces. Four different counterweights are provided, to

accommodate cartridges of any weight up to 20g and more.

AIR AND MOMENTUM

It seems that this turntable could keep a sense of proportion, with music of any scale. On a 1971 VPO recording of two Schubert symphonies [Decca] the orchestral sound was a delight, spacious and airy, while the music had its proper drive and momentum.

With our Benz Glider SL, Eric Clapton's *Backless* [RSO Deluxe] 'Walk Out In The Rain' displayed a firm and impulsive quality to the electric bass, although the track as a whole did not sound so bass-heavy as it can. But with the superb Ortofon Cadenza Black, the rocking sounds of Eric Clapton were tougher and more upfront; there was a tremendous level of detail too. Bass-lines were powerful and the drums quick, while Clapton's vocals had presence and a gritty intensity.

The Clearaudio/Ortofon combination showed it could do acoustic instruments too. With the 1974 recording of Beethoven's Septet played by the Ensemble of St James [CfP], it was striking to hear the instruments firmly placed in a believable space. A fairly weighty balance suited this music, with its foundations laid by the double-bass, with horn and bassoon above in a warm lower-mid balance, while the treble seemed just incisive enough to give immediacy and pace.

VERDICT

This model embodies most of Clearaudio's signature technical advances. It does seem that the special bearing and drive system give it a sound with exceptional detail retrieval, as well as a stable, neutral and open quality.

ABOVE: New drive system with a single DC motor has neatly replaced the three AC motors of Clearaudio's previous 'side-force-free' belt-drive concepts

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.36rpm (+0.09%)
Time to audible stabilisation	9sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.02% / 0.02%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-70.1dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-73.5dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-61.6dB
Power Consumption	4-7W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	479x485x425mm / 58.5kg

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Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News September 2014
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Also available from selected specialist retailers.**

AUDIO
FILE

Belt-driven turntable with manual speed control
 Made by: Inspire Hi-Fi Ltd, Derbyshire
 Supplied by: Inspire Hi-Fi Ltd
 Telephone: 01246 472222
 Web: www.inspirehifi.co.uk
 Price: £560 (with Rega RB202 tonearm)



Inspire Hi-Fi Black Magic Si

Inspire Hi-Fi is a turntable manufacturer that's equally at home with belt, direct or idler-drive decks – witness its range of upgrades to some of the most iconic decks of the last few decades. At £560, the Black Magic Si is the entry-level model in the firm's home-grown belt-drive range, and it includes an Inspire-branded Rega RB202 tonearm.

The platter is a precision cut 20mm frosted acrylic disc which has a recessed area in its underside to accept the deck's sub-platter, motor pulley and round section belt. The sub-platter, Inspire's own design, is machined from a block of acetyl

fewer than seven coats of paint. The plinth rests on three cone-shaped, chunky acrylic feet.

You can upgrade the Black Magic by plugging the deck into Inspire's £320 off-board PSU, a steel-cased quartz-locked speed generator.

The supplied RB202 tonearm employs Rega's standard three-point mounting system, so you could upgrade this too at a later date to a higher-spec model from Rega's stable or to Inspire's own Rega derived X100 Mk2 tonearm.



ATTENTION GRABBING

Our review sample came supplied with an Ortofon 2M Blue MM cartridge. From Kwakhu Baah's opening conga slaps and taps in 'Three Hours', on Nick Drake's *Made To Love Magic* album [Island Records], our attention was

grabbed by the Black Magic's way with the music. Each instrument sounded admirably clear with acoustic guitar and congas working within their own spaces.

Notwithstanding the Black Magic's strong analytical abilities, it's no cold or soulless performer. Instead its delivery is distinctly 'analogue', which brings lots of realism to the music. Turning to

Tracy Chapman's self-titled 1988 album [Elektra/Asylum Records] showed that the Black Magic can also conjure a sizeable sonic picture. With the Spanish guitar on 'She's Got Her Ticket' voiced well out in the left channel and the track's bass guitar resonating from behind the speaker plane, we were pulled deep into the recording from all round, with Chapman's voice of course taking centre stage.

The bass is also surprisingly well controlled for a deck at this price point: articulate and well rounded, yet without sacrificing detail.

Timing is another key string to the Black Magic's bow. Put to the test via Goldfrapp's *Tales Of Us* [Mute Records STUMM356], the Black Magic caught our ear early on with the opening, looping piano riff on 'Drew', before moving on to the rapid start/stop style of the opening strings, which the deck nailed with effortless precision.

Despite the track's changing tempo, the Inspire never sounded as if it was playing 'catch up' and it remained poised as the song gathered pace. Already demonstrated during the quieter and slower passages of this track, the Black Magic's ability to remain cool under pressure was proved as the music's dynamic swings built up – an area where many a mid-priced deck can get a little flustered.

VERDICT

By keeping things simple and investing in the areas that matter, Inspire has created a vinyl spinner that sounds superb for the money, with a neutral tone that delivers bags of musical detail. Add a decent cartridge and you'll be blessed with a package that punches well above its weight. ☺

ABOVE: No mat is required as LPs are placed directly on the acrylic platter. The 'Nightfire Red' plinth also comes in black or metallic blue while the Rega RB202 arm is a classic choice

'It's no cold or soulless performer; it brings lots of realism to the music'

resin. This, in turn, is bonded to an aluminium shaft that runs inside a bronze bearing sleeve.

The deck's curvy plinth is made from a single slab of acoustically rigid 25mm MDF, the main circular shape around 340mm in diameter, and with a 13.5mm diameter circular armboard at the two o'clock position. To achieve the chassis' deep gloss finish, Inspire applies no

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.27rpm (-0.19%)
Time to audible stabilisation	4sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.04% / 0.04%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-68.8dB (with record weight)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-71.9dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-55.3dB
Power Consumption	3W
Dimensions (WHD inc arm)	450x120x335mm



Belt-driven turntable with electronic speed control and tonearm
 Made by: Luxman Corporation, Japan
 Supplied by: Select Audio, UK
 Telephone: 01900 601954
 Web: www.luxman.com; www.selectaudio.co.uk
 Price: £4950

AUDIO
FILE



Luxman PD-171

This is a superb statement of intent from a classic Japanese name, clearly acknowledging that vinyl is well and truly back to stay.

The PD-171 most certainly wears a retro look but incorporates some fine technology. The deck is belt-driven and the high-torque synchronous AC motor derives its power from a digitally-controlled oscillator, which feeds its output signal into dual DACs and amplifier circuits. As a result, 33.3 and 45rpm are selected by a rotary switch at the front of the player and both speeds can be varied by independent controls.

Drive is transferred by a flat belt to the periphery of the 5kg aluminium platter and this is topped by one of thickest rubber mats

'The Luxman can certainly channel a 1980s vibe when required'

we have seen – although its sonic performance turned out to be somewhat mixed.

The deck comes supplied with arm and Luxman appears to have opted for a model from one of its countrymen. The fitted item bears more than a passing resemblance to the Jelco SA-250 but is finished in silver with a magnesium headshell.

The arm has an effective length of 229mm and suits cartridges ranging from 4-12g in weight, or from 12-32g when using its optional heavier counterweight. The output lead for the arm connects via a standard 5-pin socket, so experimenting with different cables is possible should the user want this.

Fit and finish of the deck is nothing short of stunning and beautiful design touches abound. It comes complete with a removable stylus illumination lamp that casts a delightful soft glow across the record when in use. A further lamp illuminates strobe markings on the underside of the platter.

FINE SENSE OF CLARITY

It seemed only fitting to start with some music from the era to which the PD-171 could well belong, so we cued up The League Unlimited Orchestra's *Love And Dancing* [Virgin] and were very pleased to hear that the Luxman

can most certainly channel a true 1980s vibe when required. The deck has a pleasing sense of impact and fluidity, making the percussion skip along with intent while capturing the essence of the analogue synthesisers playing on the track.

The performance was also imbued with a very fine sense of clarity, as the PD-171 showed itself

ABOVE: The 5kg aluminium platter is fitted with the aid of two removable screw-in handles and is topped by a rubber mat. A removable post illuminates the lowered stylus. Sturdy isolating feet support the PD-171 and are adjustable for levelling; the underside of the chassis is a hybrid wood/metal construction for good damping

to have a very clean, clear and tight top end with superb levels of detail allied to an impressive crispness.

We were thoroughly enjoying the deck's performance but felt that something was a little lacking. We replaced the mat with an Achromat and cued up Steve Earle's *Copperhead Road* LP [MCA]. The Luxman now had a better feeling of authority and much greater detail to its low end.

Kari Bremnes' 'A Lover In Berlin' from her *Norwegian Mood* album [Kirkelig Kulturverksted] soared from our loudspeakers, underpinned by a taut and fulsome acoustic bass with a properly defined note structure. Ms Bremnes' voice was fabulous, larger than life and rock-solid in the centre of the soundstage. The percussive backing effects were also sharply focused but never intruded on the main action as the Luxman was more than able to render this LPs' capacious sense of depth.

Given that the Luxman had proven itself to be such a champion in excavating filigree detail, we decided a challenge was in order and played a Bach concerto for two harpsichords, with the Sarre CO/Karl Ristenpart [Nonesuch]. The two harpsichords providing the main structure of the *Allegro* finale were as distinct as we have ever heard them, and the supporting orchestra was positioned at just the right distance behind them: a perfect backdrop but never intrusive.

VERDICT

The Luxman PD-171's stylish if retro exterior conceals a design that is absolutely contemporary. With stunning engineering and intelligent digital control electronics the PD-171 is a delight to use. It offers a captivating musical performance. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.29rpm (−0.12%)
Time to audible stabilisation	5sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.03% / 0.05%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	−68.3dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	−69.6dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	−64.0dB
Power Consumption	18W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	465x140x390mm / 23kg

AUDIO FILE

Belt-driven turntable system with electronic speed control
 Made by: McIntosh Laboratory Inc, USA
 Supplied by: Jordan Acoustics Ltd
 Telephone: 01592 744779
 Web: www.mcintoshlabs.com; www.jordanacoustics.co.uk
 Price: £7495



McIntosh MT5

It's one thing to be a whizz at electronics, and another to do turntables. They're a completely different sort of challenge. McIntosh obviously wanted to do something a bit different in a crowded marketplace, and has come up with a combination of user friendliness and 'millionaire chintz'.

Vinyl rookies will appreciate the pre-aligned cartridge already mounted in a prefitted arm. Some will love its brightly lit platter and backlit front panel (echoing classic McIntosh electronics). And on audition this deck proves far more capable than its styling may suggest. In fact, it is made for the American company by Clearaudio with its own components.

Its foundations consist of a solid stainless steel base with a thick alloy base plate with internal damping,

'The MT5 is great at setting up a vast, punchy musical groove'

and an acrylic top plate. The inner platter, about the size of a CD, is made of anodised aluminium. It sits on a magnetic bearing, so the heavy outer platter actually presents a lowish load on the bearing.

This is made from a special silicone-acrylic material, and its 2.3kg mass provides a flywheel action to assist stable playback. Drive is by a Swiss-made DC motor,

controlled by a servo system to compensate for load and/or mains fluctuations, and offering 33.3, 45 and 78rpm speeds, each with a trim pot to set absolute pitch.

The height-adjustable 9in tonearm looks and feels robust. Made from duraluminum alloy tubing with a proprietary internal damping material, it has ceramic-surfaced high precision vertical bearings and sports a magnetic bias adjuster. Prefitted is a Sumiko Blue Point No. 2 high output MC cartridge, with an alloy cantilever and elliptical diamond stylus.



A REAL 'THUMP'...

After settling down, the McIntosh MT5 proved a surprisingly strong performer. What's most appealing is its combination of smoothness and power. For example, cue up Deodato's *Night Cruiser* [Warner], and the rhythm track sounds satisfyingly meaty, with a powerful kick-drum and snare sound set behind some really impactful keyboard

work. Bass guitar is supple, and blends into the mix tightly behind the bass drum to give a real 'thump' to the deepest low frequencies.

At the same time the snare work and other percussion elements drive the song along in a surprisingly positive and purposeful way. Tonally it's beautifully rendered, being bright and sonorous with real 'rasp', yet it never becomes hard or shouty.

ABOVE: This easy-to-use turntable package sports a standard-sized platter and conventional tonearm, with prefitted Sumiko high output MC. The uplit acrylic platter certainly stands out in a room, even if the traditional McIntosh front panel design and green backlighting don't... Rear RCA phono sockets allow for cable experimentation

It's this combination of a powerful bass and an open, well-lit midband, that gives the deck real appeal – a smooth, detailed treble is the icing on the cake. There's a pleasing silkiness to the McIntosh's sound across the presence region.

The MT5's control pays dividends with more complex, layered music. Be Bop Deluxe's *Modern Music* [Harvest], is a wash of wailing guitars from the golden age of British rock, and is full of fussy percussion work and time-changes which are a chore for less able turntables. The MT5 rose to the challenge, showing consummate control of the fluid drum-kit work and laid-back backing piano.

However, while it is great at setting up a vast, punchy, musical groove which suits rock, jazz and dance down to a tee, classical programme material isn't always so amenable. With Dvořák's 'New World' Symphony [Philharmonia/Sawallisch – Columbia], its imaging faltered. The massed strings and brass towards the end of the first movement sounded a little diminished and opaque.

As it turns out, the prefitted cartridge was partly to blame for this, for while the Sumiko is a blast with punchier material it can lack finesse and insight into what's going on deep down in the groove. Replace it with, say, a Lyra Delos MC and you'll have a far more rounded musical experience that doesn't strip out the fine timbral detail.

VERDICT

Although the MT5 may have been intended as an addition to an existing McIntosh system, it stands up well in out-and-out performance terms. If you can look beyond its 'bling' then you may be smitten. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.30rpm (–0.097%)
Time to audible stabilisation	5sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.05% / 0.04%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	–68.1dB / –70.1dB (with clamp)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	–69.0dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	–60.3dB
Power Consumption	1–2W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	445x190x483mm / 14kg



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AUDIO FILE

Belt-driven turntable system with electronic speed control
 Made by: Pro-Ject Audio Systems, Austria
 Supplied by: Henley Designs Ltd, UK
 Telephone: 01235 511166
 Web: www.project-audio.com; www.henleydesigns.co.uk
 Price: £2200 (inc. arm and cartridge)



Pro-Ject Xtension 9 Super Pack

Pro-Ject's Xtension 9 Super Pack mates the Xtension 9 Evolution turntable and 9CC Evolution arm to the new Ortofon Quintet Black MC. Its plinth measures a nicely compact 465x350mm and so size-related rack placement is not an issue.

This is made from MDF and filled with a metal granulate to produce a non-resonant, high mass, base all topped with a very swish paint finish in High Gloss Red or White. The deck stands on three damped aluminium feet, pre-adjusted for level at the factory.

The platter is machined from a non-resonant alloy that is internally damped close to its periphery. This spins on an inverted ceramic bearing aided by a magnetic suspension system to further reduce the load seen by the bearing. It

'Vocals sounded solid and perfectly locked between our speakers'

is topped with an interface layer made from recycled records and a heavy record puck is supplied – the use of further mats is not recommended by Pro-Ject.

The motor sits in the left hand rear corner of the plinth and is normally sheltered under a sturdy metal cover. A single push-button

at the front of the plinth starts and stops the platter and also selects 33.3 or 45rpm.

Pre-fitted to the deck is the latest version of Pro-Ject's 9CC Evolution tonearm, which consists of a single piece, variable-thickness carbon fibre armtube and headshell, pivoting on high quality ABEC7 bearings. Four sorbothane-damped counterweights are supplied for cartridge matching. The arm is fully and easily adjustable for VTA (via arm height) and azimuth.

The Super Pack deal is completed by the range-topping Black variant of Ortofon's new Quintet cartridge series. This is a conventional low output MC design sporting a fine nude Shibata stylus.



A COHESIVE WHOLE

This deck exhibits that certain indefinable sonic 'rightness' that generally characterises the upper reaches of the Pro-Ject range. We were immediately struck by the superbly low subjective levels of groove noise and

background mush.

The Eagles' 'Long Road Out Of Eden' [Universal] starts with some quiet instrumental artefacts that stretch off into the soundstage on the left hand side and the Pro-Ject captured the scale and depth of these perfectly, sweeping the action dramatically and precisely from

left to right when the full band began. Don Henley's vocals sounded large, solid and locked perfectly in between our loudspeakers.

Anita Baker's vocals on 'Caught Up In The Rapture' from her *Rapture* album [Elektra 960444-1] were beautifully clear. Equally, the drum strikes backing her were taut and well defined, helping to render the whole performance as a tightly cohesive whole. Better still was the Pro-Ject's fine sense of image stability that painted a vivid and expertly scaled sonic picture in our listening room.

A well designed arm and cartridge, plus a good quality drive system and heavy platter should also be a recipe for a good bass performance and so it generally proved to be with the Pro-Ject. Albums were underpinned by good weight and a rhythmically adroit guiding hand – although occasionally, we felt that the Xtension 9 Evolution was approaching the limits of its comfort zone with more punchy, fast-paced material.

The most notable example we found of this was with Galaxy And Phil Fearon's 'Dancing Tight' [Ensign]. Here, the low end was slightly lacking its customary sense of spot-on timing and impact. Generally speaking, we found the Pro-Ject to be assured and smooth at the bottom end of the spectrum.

VERDICT

The careful downsizing of the original Xtension design, plus the addition of an updated and improved tonearm results in a turntable combination with few vices. Add in a superb cartridge at a discounted price and the outcome is a veritable bargain. ☺

ABOVE: The Xtension 9's plinth is available in gloss red or white. The fitted Black MC is a flagship model from Ortofon's new Quintet range. The Evolution tonearm's bearing yoke has been increased in size for this model

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.27rpm (−0.18%)
Time to audible stabilisation	5sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.07% / 0.02%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	−68.2dB / −68.7dB (with clamp)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	−67.6dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	−61.1dB
Power Consumption	6W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	465x185x350mm / 16kg



Belt-driven turntable with electronic speed control
 Made by: Rega Research Ltd, Essex
 Supplied by: Rega Research Ltd
 Telephone: 01702 333071
 Web: www.rega.co.uk
 Price (including arm): £1598

AUDIO
FILE



Rega RP8/RB808

Rega's RP8 turntable uses what it calls 'Double Brace Technology'. Here stiffening braces above and below the plinth provide rigidity between the turntable main bearing and the arm mounting.

Thanks to this, Rega's Roy Gandy was able to envisage a plinth construction that would be much lighter than in previous designs, so in the RP8 the plinth has given way to a very light skeletal chassis. From a functional point of view, the RP8 on its skeletal chassis is complete in itself but Rega has added a separate outer frame, using the same foam-sandwich construction, to support a dust cover.

The two brace pieces are of different materials, to further reduce any resonances or airborne vibrations. The lower brace is made of a phenolic resin while the top one is magnesium. There are other innovations, most notably in the platter. Working with a young glass

The RP8 comes with the Rega TTPSU power supply; it produces a 24V AC signal with a claimed less than 0.1% distortion, unaffected by mains fluctuations or noise, to drive the motor, and provides switching for 33.3 and 45rpm. Each RP8 motor is hand-tuned and matched to its TTPSU, via an anti-vibration circuit built in under the deck. The usual single standard drive belt is replaced by two of Rega's higher-grade belts.

Outwardly identifiable by its gloss paint finish, the new RB808 tonearm is based on the retooled casting introduced with the RB303, but with improved bearings and a tightened spindle-fit tolerance.

Reducing the mass of the turntable meant that the mass of the arm had to be reduced too. So a new and lighter vertical bearing assembly was designed.

As usual with Rega, cartridge tracking force is applied by a spring, controlled by a calibrated dial while a simple pull-out button applies the bias compensation. Finally, the audio signal emerges via newly-specified low capacitance phono cables.

ABOVE: An outer frame surrounds the skeletal chassis and supports a hinged dust cover. (The deck functions without the rectangular part). The RP8 has new higher-quality signal cables and phono plugs. Rega's Apheta cartridge seen here [not reviewed] is available as a £600 factory-fit option

'A major feature was the RP8's ability to portray really low-level detail'

engineering company using the very latest CNC equipment, Gandy had found that it was possible to machine glass accurately enough to make a two-part glass platter – as in the RP6 [HFN Apr '12].

A logical next step was the three-part stepped platter used here where, between main disc and outer ring, there's now an additional, 6mm-thick middle ring.



DEPTH AND DETAIL

When it came to conveying depth or space in a recording, whether wholly natural or cunningly enhanced, the RP8 was very impressive indeed. The perennial *Muddy Waters: Folk Singer* [Discovery] demonstrated this very well, with Muddy's voice sounding both intimate and tremendously powerful in the

seemingly cavernous acoustic. On Waters' incredible, emotive guitar, you could hear every detail as the bottleneck rasped on the wound strings. Buddy Guy's clean-and-clear single-note obbligatoros, on the second acoustic guitar, could be heard to come from his seated position to the rear right of the singer, just as you see in the original session photos. Willie Dixon's bass was full and weighty – again seeming firmly placed in space.

We also felt the bass was outstandingly good on *The King James Version* [Sheffield Lab, direct-cut] with the Harry James band. The bass line had real precision and urgency, the ability to stop and start combining with a tight drum sound in a way that was both natural and also got your feet tapping.

Changing from a Benz Micro Glider SL to the excellent Ortofon Cadenza Black, gave a sound that was more analytical, with an impression of precision rather than warmth. On a track like Clapton's 'I'll Make Love To You Anytime' its super-detailing paid off.

Another major feature of the RP8 was an increased ability to portray really low-level detail. For example, on the track 'Fast Car' [Tracy Chapman – Elektra] there's a credit for Ed Black on steel guitar, but this instrument is mixed so far back you could probably listen to the song 100 times without really noticing it. With the RP8, though, we found we picked up on it straight away.

VERDICT

The RP8 embodies the fullest realisation of Roy Gandy's ideas yet. It rewards with a sound that has depth, purity and realism that belies its moderate price. Its stylishness is just the icing on the cake. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.45rpm (+0.34%)
Time to audible stabilisation	4sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.03% / 0.03%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-69.4dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-70.8dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-62.3dB
Power Consumption	7W
Dimensions (WHD)	446x105x363mm

AUDIO FILE

Direct-drive, suspended-subchassis turntable with tonearm
 Made by: STST Hifi-Manufaktur, Germany
 Supplied by: Puresound, UK
 Telephone: 01822 612449
 Web: www.stst-hifi.de; www.puresound.info
 Prices: turntable, £4995; tonearm, £2795



STST Motus II/Vertex

It's that very rare bird: a suspended-subchassis turntable with a direct-drive motor. A development of STST's original Motus solid-chassis model, the Motus II inverts the usual concept of a subchassis turntable.

Although the 'plinth' is a substantial component made of 20mm MDF, in reality it is just a cover. Once the platter and arm have been removed, it can be lifted off to reveal the whole mechanism. Below, a 12mm-thick laminated baseboard stands on three feet.

The subchassis is cut from a 13mm laminate and suspended on three tension springs, each with level adjustment. Mass distribution can be varied by means of large brass weights while just inboard of the main suspension points are

the fixed shaft. The platter itself is machined from a polymer material, with a recessed centre to give clearance for record labels and bevelled at the outer edge. No record-clamping device is needed.

Phase-locked-loop servo electronics control the motor via a separate mains power supply unit that provides the necessary 18V DC via a two-pin connector. It takes the Motus under ten seconds to get to 33.3rpm from rest.

Instead of a conventional armboard, the STST subchassis has a large cylindrical well and the arm mounting-base fits over this like a cap, clamped by a hex bolt. As the arm pillar is placed eccentrically in the base, this can be rotated to vary the overhang.

STST's own Vertex arm comes in 9in, 10in and 12in versions and uses conventionally arrayed gimbal bearings in a very rugged housing, while the arm tube is of carbon-fibre. Alternative

counterweights are supplied while the machined alloy headshell is adjustable for azimuth.



A PROPER AUTHORITY

With a Benz Micro Glider SL cartridge installed we quickly discovered that music with the STST Motus II could be enjoyably foot-tapping. For example, with Eric Clapton and *Backless* [RSO], the STST

did a great job on the bass-heavy opening track, 'Walk Out In The Rain', with a bottom end that was powerful but quick, and it kept the music sounding clear and not too grungy. On the uptempo 'Watch Out For Lucy' the striding bass line had its proper authority while everything else fell happily into place, Marcy Levy's background vocals clearly placed and the mixed-down harmonica bubbling along. Clapton's lithe guitar was a real joy.

The STST could dig deeply into the sound of familiar albums, even from the mono era. Putting on *The Best Of Muddy Waters* [Pye] we felt transported back to the moment when the tracks were taped.

The STST excelled too with Thad Jones/Mel Lewis big band's 1970 recording *Consummation* [Pure Pleasure], sounding smooth yet not rounded-off. After Richard Davis's bass intro, the band came in as if appearing out of inky blackness, with a wonderful sense of space and depth, and above all, we think, a feeling of stability.

With nicely-mixed classical recordings, the STST could deliver a poised, balanced and effortless sound. Holst's *St Paul's Suite*, with the Bournemouth Sinfonietta under George Hurst [RCA], was a case in point. Here the STST really conveyed the recording's reverberant, deep and slightly hazy perspectives.

VERDICT

STST has quite successfully reinterpreted the idea of direct-drive from an audiophile perspective. Used with the Vertex arm, the Motus II gave a sound with tremendous stability and very 'black' backgrounds, free of any noticeable colorations and with an authoritative and responsive bass. Ⓛ

ABOVE: Our Motus II was in maple, with an alloy/carbon fibre laminated top plate, but many other finishes are available. STST's suspended subchassis is stabilised by three adjustable leaf springs while two brass counterweights compensate for the weight of your choice of tonearm

'The STST Motus could dig deeply into familiar albums – even in mono'

dampers in the form of auxiliary leaf springs. The correct setting – via two bolts – is achieved when, if the subchassis is displaced, it oscillates up and down from four to six times with no lateral movement.

The main bearing housing rotates around an inverted bearing post that uses a ceramic ball and Teflon thrust plate at the top, with a sleeve of special plastic encircling

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.31rpm (-0.08%)
Time to audible stabilisation	6sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.02% / 0.02%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-68.0dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-66.7dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-54.4dB
Power Consumption	3-12W
Dimensions (WHD)	480x220x400mm



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DESIGNED & EXCLUSIVELY HAND BUILT IN ENGLAND

AUDIO FILE

Belt-driven turntable with manual speed control
Made by: VPI Industries Inc., New Jersey, USA
Supplied by: Renaissance Audio, Scotland
Telephone: 0131 555 3922
Web: www.vpiindustries.com; www.renaissanceaudio.co.uk
Price (including arm): £1975



VPI Scout 1.1

VPI's entry level Scout [*HFN* Nov '09] looked deceptively simple, while promising lots of easy adjustment for the deck – even the supplied in-house tonearm that came as part of the package boasted an easy to remove arm wand, thereby facilitating rapid cartridge swapping.

The Scout 1.1 offers more refinement for your money, and is the cheapest VPI turntable to use a freestanding motor unit housed in its own steel case, which tucks into a dedicated cutout in the plinth.

Compared to the original Scout, the 1.1 brings in a number of changes. The former white frosted acrylic platter is replaced with a 1.38in-thick 6061 grade

'We found the VPI to be a very warm-hearted musical performer'

alloy platter, which VPI says can be machined to tighter tolerances. Thanks to a solid steel plate bonded to its underside, the platter now tips the scales at 5.8kg. VPI has also upgraded the Scout's main bearing.

The Scout's 30mm MDF plinth is carried over from the old model, sporting the same steel plate bracing its underside, and comes finished in a black-only paint job. Also carried over are the threaded conical feet, although these are now rubber tipped. Finally, the

Scout's AC synchronous Hurst motor system has also been tweaked for UK-bound models, with low resonance power supply components specifically selected for a 50Hz mains frequency.

Completing the package is the latest 9in version of VPI's JMW Scout stainless/alloy unipivot tonearm, now with an anodised black and polished silver two-tone finish. The arm essentially comes in two sections, comprising the armboard and lower 'bearing' assembly that's fixed to the plinth, and the upper housing and arm wand. Being a unipivot, the bearing is actually a fiendishly sharp tungsten-carbide point upon which the upper section, with its machined cup, is balanced.

The JMW arm still partially depends on VPI's trademark anti-skate method, relying on tension in the exposed twisted arm wires that loop from the arm to the RCA junction box. To this, VPI has now added a traditional nylon thread and weight to provide added force.



A SUBTLE APPROACH
With Benz Micro ACE high output MC cartridge [*HFN* Sept '11] fitted, we found the VPI to be a very warm-hearted musical performer. Stephen Fretwell's 'Bumper Cars' track from his *Man On The Roof* LP [Fiction Records] had plenty of romance and warmth in the midrange, which sounded rich without being overly pronounced – although it was a tad

ABOVE:
Freestanding AC motor nestles within a cutout in the plinth to drive the alloy platter via a rubber periphery belt. A stepped pulley aids manual speed change. Threaded conical alloy feet make levelling easy and they have furniture-friendly rubber tips. The unipivot tonearm allows plenty of adjustment

more forward than the most neutral vinyl spinners in this price range.

Because of this, Fretwell's restrained and melancholic vocals had real clarity, while strings gently emanated from the back of the soundstage to envelop the music, without sounding forced in any way.

The Scout 1.1 is subtle in its approach to extracting the music from an LP's grooves, and while the treble is not ultimately as revealing or focused as with some, what you do hear is very organically presented. The higher notes of Fretwell's plucked acoustic guitar strings, for example, caught our attention every time as they escaped the tweeters with a natural twang before disappearing back into the mix.

The bass guitar in Morrissey's 'I'm Not Sorry' [Attack Records] can often result in muddled bass that degenerates into boom. Thankfully the Scout casts aside the shortcomings presumed of unipivot tonearm designs by confronting the track's bottom-end head-on and determinedly keeping everything in check. The resulting bass notes were convincingly low while sounding taut and free of unnatural overhang, adding to the track's sense of power and pace.

And while the VPI's imaging isn't pinpoint sharp, the soundstage it sets out is expansive and open with instruments sounding full-bodied.

VERDICT

The original Scout was something of a game-changer for those wanting a more user-friendly approach to high-end vinyl replay, and this new model promises even greater long-term enjoyment. The improved platter, PSU and superbly engineered tonearm make it excellent value. ⤴

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.54rpm (+0.63%)
Time to audible stabilisation	5sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.06% / 0.04%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-69.6dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-73.9dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-57.1dB
Power Consumption	5W
Dimensions (WHD)	483x102x330mm

Ayre

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AUDIO
FILE

MM/MC Phono preamp
 Made by: Rothwell Audio Products Ltd, Bolton, Lancs
 Supplied by: Rothwell Audio Products Ltd
 Telephone: 01204 366133
 Web: www.rothwellaudioproducts.co.uk
 Price: £380



Rothwell Audio Rialto

Rothwell Audio has been going for a quarter of a century, mostly making guitar effects pedals. Its hi-fi range encompasses three moving-coil step-up transformers, two MM-only phono stages, a valve preamplifier, interconnects and attenuators. Rothwell's first phono stage was launched at the 1990 London Hi-Fi Show.

The Rialto MM/MC phono stage is tiny and perhaps no oil painting

'It's extremely detailed, and with a wonderful directness to vocals'

in aesthetic terms. Whereas the likes of Pro-Ject's Phono Box RS or Musical Fidelity's M1 LPS lavish acres of beautiful aluminium on their cases, this comes in an 'MGB dashboard' crackle black finished steel with silver fascia.

Indeed, it's so nondescript in styling terms that one suspects designer Andrew Rothwell wants it to be tucked away from public view – he helpfully notes that its ultra-low power consumption means it

can be left on and forgotten. The back panel has 24V DC socket, input and output RCA phono sockets and a substantial earthing post.

It uses internal switches to toggle between MM and MC, in order to keep the signal paths short – and the cost down. Seven stages of power supply filtering have been used, and each of its three Class A gain stages uses two discrete transistors with no global feedback, it is claimed. Instead of offering an upgrade power supply option, the company suggests that any extra funds should be spent on one of its step-up transformers, to be used in conjunction with the Rialto

in moving-magnet mode.



SWEET AND SPACIOUS
 The Rialto offers a wonderfully even sound, for example playing The Crusaders track 'Rodeo Drive' from *Streetlife* LP [MCA Records] without fear or favour – it simply went straight to the heart of the music. The Rialto is not showy: it doesn't try to wow with its apparent detail or bowl you over with a big, larger-than-life sort of character. Instead,

LEFT: Welcome to the world of audio minimalism... Simple rear RCA phono inputs and outputs are provided on the back panel of the 92mm-wide Rialto, plus a ground post and a socket for the offboard power supply. Switching between MM and MC is done internally

it gently slips away into the music, letting what the musicians are playing and *how* they're playing it come to the fore. It is transparent in the true sense of the word: a phono stage that hides itself, letting the music flow in a lovely, easy way.

The mark of a great phono stage is its consistency across genres of music, and the Rialto certainly has no favourites – cue up the 4hero track 'Give In' from *Play With The Changes* [Raw Canvas] and it gives a wonderfully organic and even sort of sound. It doesn't impress with a big, thumping sound, but cuts to the chase and gets the feet tapping.

It is actually extremely detailed, with a wonderful directness to vocals, for example, but doesn't throw things out at you if it's not supposed to. Rather, it strings together all the component parts of the music together in a most satisfying way. Treble is sweet and spacious, bass taut and tuneful, and the midband is dynamic but even.

A minor quibble is that it hasn't the most expansive soundstage width. When we listened to the old (1955) Beethoven Symphony No.5 recording for RCA by Charles Munch and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, we thought the sound had excellent depth, but the extremes of the recorded acoustic seemed a little shut-in.

VERDICT

The Rothwell Audio Rialto may come in a small metal box with scant attention paid to styling, but it sounds good. In fact, in our Dec '13 Group Test it was awarded the 'Outstanding' badge. If you want a simple phono stage that sounds natural, smooth and musical, then it's an obvious choice. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	47kohm / 100ohm
Input sensitivity (MM/MC re. 0dBV)	8.12mV / 871µV
Input overload (MM/MC)	36mV / 3.7mV
Max. output/Imp (re. 1% THD)	4.0V / 20ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 5mV/500µV in)	84.8dB / 71.2dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.09dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.032-0.17%
Power consumption	1W
Dimensions (WHD)	92x60x155mm



CD player, USB & S/PDIF DAC
 Made by: Audio Research Corp, Minnesota, USA
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.audioresearch.com; www.absolutesounds.com
 Price: £8050

AUDIO
FILE



Audio Research CD6

Producing a solid-state version of a valve CD player is nothing new for the Minnesota-based company, although, for many, 'Audio Research' means valves. But at least the CD6 can be sited in a cabinet or other enclosure with doors, whereas the REF9 CD player/DAC [HFN May '13] needs ventilation.

Both players confront the current need for a plethora of digital inputs and sampling rates with a full complement. The CD6's four digital inputs comprise asynchronous USB 2.0 (ARC supplies a CD with the drivers for Windows and Mac), coaxial RCA, and Toslink. Although all inputs offer 192kHz/24-bit resolution certain settings are proscribed, yet there is ample freedom in what rates you opt to use with each source, for fine-tuning the sound. Upsampling to 174.6/192kHz may be switched

'Tweakers will have a field day with the various optional settings here'

off. Another option is the choice between 'Fast' and 'Slow' digital filters, the latter better suited to 96kHz+ digital inputs.

For CD playback ARC has fitted the Philips PRO2R transport with access through a sliding door on the top, and the CD held in place by a magnetic puck. Enjoying trickle-down technology from the REF DAC and REF CD9, the CD6

employs quad 24-bit DACs running in mono mode, with dual master oscillators. One clock circuit handles 44.1/88.2/176.4kHz sample rates, the other 48/96/192kHz.

The fascia has a dimmable display on the left side, revealing CD replay data, while three vertical LED displays indicate sample rates, the input selected and (extreme right) 'Fast-Slow-Upsample-Power'. Below these are buttons for Power, Previous, Play, Next, Pause, Stop and Input. More extensive control can be found via the supplied all-metal IR remote handset.



'ANALOGUE' RESOLVE

For auditioning we used Audio Research REF75 and D'Agostino Momentum Stereo amps, both fed by a ARC REF5SE preamplifier, taking turns driving Wilson Alexias. What was revealed with no uncertainty was that the CD6's purported ability to tame a lush system proved to be a boon.

We experimented with the settings and found that they even had their use with different CDs, and certainly with the music fed by computer. On *She & Him, Volume One* [Domino], going from CD to download, and varying the upsampling could rob Zoëy Deschanel's voice of a certain liquid character, or turn it sibilant. Tweakers will have a field day with these various settings...

With *Elvis – The Movie Soundtracks* [RCA/Sony Music, 20CDs] it was the 'redneck' slap

ABOVE: CD top-loading allows plenty of real estate for a conventional display and row of transport controls. A full 15 LEDs show sampling rate, chosen input and digital filter choices. Rear Balanced (XLR) and single-ended (RCA) analogue outputs are joined by USB, optical and coaxial S/PDIF and one AES/EBU digital input; digital outs are offered too

bass on 'Return To Sender' from *Girls! Girls! Girls!* that made the hairs stand up. The snap was precise, authentic, just like a live gig. It flowed, and maintained a level of substance and mass that proved irresistible.

We then played the same material through the USB input at two different levels of download. CD simply sounded more visceral and convincing, USB a bit indistinct and grainy.

So we turned to Caravan's recent *Paradise Filter* [Caravan Records] for its complexity and modernity. The title track is a wash of ethereal textures that will charm the faithful, as prog-rocky as one would anticipate. If ever a band created 'soundscapes', it is Caravan and the CD6 did its Capability Brown schtick with aplomb.

'The Paradise Filter' elicits analogies of a fabric-like nature, gentle vocals, sweeping keyboards – then an interlude of tearing guitar, wispy flute and solid percussion. It's a challenge the CD6 resolved in a most 'analogue' fashion. The lateral spread was seamless, nothing jarred, it all coalesced. We were reminded of the CD9, one of the finest-sounding CD players we've used. But here's a £4k price cut – and all you lose is a hint of warmth.

VERDICT

This really is a 'poor man's REF CD9', though 'poor' a relative term. The main sonic differences are a sharper top-end, which could tighten the sound of a soft system (eg, using all tubes, or vintage kit), followed by a slight hygienic thinness that continues through the midband. That aside, we could live with this honey forever. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	6.42Vrms at 242ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio (CD / S/PDIF in / USB in)	109.5dB/110.2dB/110.9dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.022% / 0.00036%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.074% / 0.00077%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz Fast/Slow filter)	+0.0dB to -0.65dB
Digital jitter (CD / S/PDIF in / USB in)	165psec / 180psec / 40psec
Resolution @ -100dB (CD / S/PDIF input)	±0.1dB / ±0.1dB
Power consumption	20W
Dimensions (WHD)	480x134x310mm

AUDIO
FILE

Top-loading CD player with tube output stage
 Made by: Loit Design Pte Ltd, Singapore
 Supplied by: Alternative Audio
 Telephone: 01984 624242
 Web: www.loit.com.sg; www.alternativeaudio.co.uk
 Price: £20,000



Loit Passeri

Weighing over 20kg, the Loit Passeri CD player is the first product from the talented young designer Lup Yoong Kam of Singapore. Clearly a perfectionist, Kam has come up with a product that simply exudes quality.

It is also a great piece of industrial design. At the outset, Kam commissioned well-known Russian designer Artemy Lebedev who envisaged the CD cover as a simple flat disc, ringed by a glow of blue light. But Kam thought this was too much, and preferred the cover to match the metallic finish of the feet.

In practice the cover is aluminium and the feet are stainless steel. Says Kam: 'We tried a lot of combinations and at the end, this was [sonically] the best.' Kam admits that the choice of carbon fibre for

Oven Controlled Crystal Oscillator master clock, chosen for maximum precision. Digital-to-analogue conversion is by pairs of 24-bit/96kHz Burr-Brown PCM1704 chips.

The tubes are Sovtek 6H30 double-triodes, three for each channel. A single stage of amplification provides current-to-voltage conversion, low-pass filtering and output buffering, without any negative feedback. The rearmost tubes are used along with a MOSFET circuit as the voltage regulator for the HT power supply and there are separate supply components for the digital and analogue sections of each channel.

The chassis has a low centre of gravity and even weight distribution between the three feet. Each of its stainless-steel towers conceals a ceramic ball that provides the support point and transfers energy to avoid a 'build-up of resonances within the player'. The front-panel screen offers a bold two-line display while fascia buttons

provide standard transport controls, 'Eject' operating the somewhat noisy motorised loader cover.



TACTILE REALITY

We quickly realised that the Passeri was something special. It seemed to let the music breathe in its own space, with both instruments and voices fully formed, presented without even a trace of mechanical

harshness. For example, on 'Kalerka' from Rebecca Pidgeon's *The Raven* [Chesky], the singer's voice was tangibly clear and endearingly textured, while the instrumental background in this more artful and complex studio production seemed to form itself like a warm and almost cosy shell around the singer. While the bass was soft and unemphatic, the overall effect was engaging and easy on the ear.

After this it was fascinating to hear how the Passeri would handle more rocking material. With Ry Cooder and *Bop Till You Drop* from 1979 [Warner Bros], the sound was inviting and informative. With 'Little Sister' the Passeri drew you in to the mix of guitars, presented as intelligently-combined musical threads rather than a melange. The bass seemed understated, giving you the bass guitar line clearly enough, but not with especially great power.

Respighi's *Church Windows*, on Reference Recordings, impressed by the calm, measured quality of the music-making as well as the ambient space. We found ourselves repeatedly replaying the second of the 'Windows' in the Suite, 'St Michael Archangel', just to hear the huge gong crash at the end. This sounded just great, true and natural, except that it should have had a bit more bottom end weight.

VERDICT

There's a lot to admire in this player before you switch it on, and the sonics more than live up to expectation. And, with a presentation that's rather like putting a valve amp in your system, it welcomes you into the music with ease, naturalness and integrity. ☺

ABOVE: The Loit casework is of carbon fibre. Readable from a distance, the front panel LCD display can be switched off using the supplied remote. The six valves are Russian 6H30 double-triodes. Rear socketry includes balanced and unbalanced analogue and digital outputs, but, unusually these days, no digital input

'The Loit Passeri seemed to let the music breathe in its own space'

the casing was initially made mainly for aesthetic reasons, but says later listening trials showed that it did not add any flavour to the sound.

Inevitably, the silicon-gel mounted 'CD engine' used is the Philips CD-Pro2LF, a metal-chassis mechanism which has become the industry standard for high-end players. On the chassis in front of the transport is the all-important

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	4.60Vrms at 392-156ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio	102.2dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0051% / 0.0055%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0145% / 0.0030%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.48dB
Digital jitter	125pssec
Resolution @ -100dB	±1.0dB
Power consumption	93W
Dimensions (WHD)	480x134x390mm



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Simaudio Moon Nēo 260D

We were bowled over by the technical performance and subjective sound quality of Simaudio's Moon 380D standalone DAC [*HFN* Aug '13]. The Moon Nēo 260D CD transport with optional DAC is a new addition to this Canadian audio company's portfolio, so we were keen to get our hands on it for a review.

Simaudio's new Moon Nēo designs are built into casework with sculpted front panels akin to the aesthetics of the firm's luxurious Evolution Series components.

Here we're assessing it as a CD player which, like the majority of players today, features digital inputs for playing additional sources via its digital-to-analogue converter stages. But it is available as a £1650 dedicated CD transport with AES/EBU (XLR) and S/PDIF (RCA) digital

from computer sources. The DAC also sports three S/PDIF inputs: two electrical (RCA) and one optical (Toslink), all of which will accept incoming data up to 192kHz/24-bit. And the DAC's analogue stage has both balanced and single-ended analogue outputs.

This optional DAC board features an alternative 32-bit DAC to the ES9016S Sabre from ESS that's to be found in the costlier 380D. The galvanically isolated asynchronous USB input is the same, however, and uses the popular XMOS interface. Mac OS provides native support, while drivers for Windows PCs need to be downloaded.

The 260D's multi-segment status display looks a little old-fashioned but it does indicate the incoming sampling frequency when using the player's DAC section. The rear panel, meanwhile, also has various connectors to facilitate system integration.

The supplied handset is a perfunctory plastic affair, but there's a swish aluminium back-lit controller (the FRM 3)

available at £399. All Nēo series Moon products are black but may be requested in silver or a 'two-tone' finish at no extra cost.



A FAMILY LIKENESS

We described Simaudio's Moon 380D DAC as sounding even-handed and luxuriously 'comfortable', making for easy-going long-term listening. The new 260D delivers

more of the same, its music-making 'rounded' and inviting. Its bass is extended and punchy, while its refined treble quality makes it a great all-rounder for varied digital collections. We were struck by the 260D's exceptional smoothness and civility, and a tonal richness that invited prolonged listening sessions.

We spent time alternately playing CDs in the 260D and comparing rips of the discs via USB, but couldn't reliably discern any subjective difference in sound.

However, playing 'Chan Chan' from the *Buena Vista Social Club* featuring the late Cuban pianist Rubén González [World Circuit] made a compelling case for hi-res computer audio. Using the USB input of the 260D's on-board DAC we were now able to appreciate the enhanced sound quality of a 96kHz/24-bit digital transfer alongside a CD-quality 44.1/16 file. The fine transparency of the 260D allowed the superiority of the hi-res version to be clearly obvious.

In every respect, the Moon stepped up a gear when playing top-notch hi-res recordings. The acoustic jazz project *Quiet Winter Night* on Norway's audiophile 2L label sounded exquisite. Hearing the realistic sound of the drum kit as percussionist Rune Arnesen opens the track 'Stille, stille kommer vi' was enough to make any audiophile's heart-rate quicken.

VERDICT

The Nēo 260D sounds exceptionally refined and detailed yet doesn't cost a king's ransom. If you're in the market for a hi-res-capable USB DAC, then, you could plump for it simultaneously acquiring the last CD player you'll ever need. ☺

ABOVE: To the right of the display lie familiar CD transport keys while, on the left, standby and track programming buttons are augmented by an input selector and display on/off controls. A silver finish is available

'A fine transparency allowed the superiority of high-res to be obvious'

outputs. The mechanism in the 260D transport is decoupled from the player's chassis by a gel-based floating mount designed to provide good mechanical grounding and effective isolation from vibration.

The DAC section is an £800 option that can be retro-fitted by an appointed dealer. Of course, it has a 192kHz/24-bit capable USB input for playing hi-res audio downloads

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	1.96Vrms at 73ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio (CD / S/PDIF in / USB in)	108.8dB/108.9dB/108.5dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.0004% / 0.00025%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.0005% / 0.0007%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0dB to -0.12/-1.4/-4.9dB
Digital jitter (CD / S/PDIF in / USB in)	115psec / 10psec / 10psec
Resolution @ -100dB (CD / S/PDIF input)	±0.4dB / ±0.1dB
Power consumption	11W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD)	429x86x333mm



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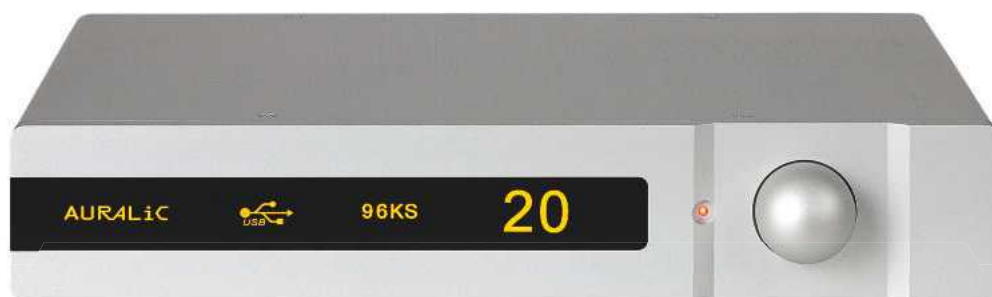
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Auralic Vega

Auralic will be a new name to many readers as only recently has this innovative brand become available to UK audiophiles. Based in Beijing, Auralic calls its Vega a 'digital processor'.

We're more likely to call it a digital preamplifier, since it's a DAC with a (digital) volume control and Class A preamp built in – not merely a high-current DAC output. There are no analogue inputs but neither are there any fixed-level line outs, so to use it simply as a DAC you connect XLR or RCA outputs to your amp and leave the gain set to max.

At the rear are five digital inputs. The AES/EBU (XLR) and three S/PDIF inputs (two electrical via RCA, one optical via Toslink) will handle LPCM up to 24-bit/192kHz, while its asynchronous USB input will accept incoming data all the way up to 32-bit/384kHz. As well as being compatible with 1-bit/2.8224MHz DSD (DSD64) the USB input will

fascia, with just a rotary knob on the right, is dominated by a large active-matrix organic LED display that's really gorgeous!

Pushing in and releasing the knob brings the DAC out of standby, while pressing it again enables its ample configuration menu. Under its bonnet the DSP upsamples all incoming data to 32-bit/1.5MHz and also controls the Auralic's X MOS-based USB interface, buffering data to minimise jitter. The DSP also provides myriad digital filter options.

SMOOTH AND CREAMY

We found the Vega's sound quality enchanting and immersive. Its designers appear to have erred towards a slightly 'warm' and opulent sound character that allows for extended listening without fatigue. Detail is plentiful but rarely is it thrown in your face.

One could fill a book describing the subtle variations in presentation offered by the Vega's digital filter options. We generally found the DAC's Mode 2 setting preferable when playing CD quality files, especially with well-balanced

recordings – perhaps because its group of filters offers the flattest frequency response. With harder-edged recordings we tended to favour the Mode 4 setting.

Listening to the album *Hidden Colours* by the David Rees-Williams Trio [DePaeon Records] revealed how smooth and creamy the Vega can sound. The best track on the album is the sublime 'When I Am

ABOVE: AMOLED display shows selected input, volume setting and sampling frequency of incoming data. The rotary multi-function control knob is used to access the Vega's setup menu. At the rear, you find five digital inputs: USB, AES/EBU (XLR) and three S/PDIF (two RCA, one Toslink). It offers single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) analogue outputs

Laid In Earth' from Purcell's *Dido And Aeneas*. The acoustic bass sounded rich and full-bodied, with good transient attack to the plucked notes without appearing over-etched. The piano remained bold and powerful throughout.

Moving on to some more adventurous jazz we listened to several tracks from the CD version of Carlos Franzetti's *The Jazz Kamerata* [Chesky]. This is a beautiful recording, with plenty of space around the jazz ensemble that allowed the Vega to paint wonderful images of the musicians working in harmony. Again, the sound was richly textured and the tone colours vibrant, the strings and woodwinds accompanying the piano, saxophone, bass and drums depicted exquisitely across the wide and deep soundstage.

We spent countless hours listening to hi-res downloads from 2L and Channel Classics, including DXD (24-bit/352.8kHz PCM) master files and native DSD recordings. However, we must say we were largely underwhelmed by the sound of DSD files delivered via DoP. Sure, there's a pleasing warmth and 'ease' to the sound but, to us, high sampling-rate PCM appears more lifelike. Nevertheless, Auralic is to be applauded for enabling its Vega to handle *all* formats, ensuring it to be a future-proof investment.

VERDICT

There's a natural ease to the Vega's music making, yet it's not too smooth-sounding to rob the music of vitality. Its feature set is also in the top drawer for 2014, making it an outstanding proposition for anyone looking for a top quality DAC/preamplifier. ☺

'The Vega's specification is state-of-the-art in consumer audio gear'

also handle double-rate DSD with a 5.6448MHz sampling frequency. Such a specification represents the current state-of-the-art in consumer audio gear.

The Vega's chic-looking casework is made from an internally coated alloy. Auralic claims this makes protects the electronics within from vibration and electromagnetic interference. The minimalist alloy

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	4.10Vrms at 0.25ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB)	115.8dB / 115.3dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.00004% / 0.00016%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.00035% / 0.00040%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.1dB/-0.7dB/-2.1dB
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz/USB)	8psec / 8psec / 14psec
Resolution @ -100dB (S/PDIF / USB)	±0.1dB / ±0.1dB
Power consumption	10W
Dimensions (WHD)	330x65x230mm

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Furutech ADL X1

Furutech's Alpha Design Lab range includes cables, headphones and earphones, a portable headphone amplifier and stylish system equivalents of the ADL X1 here. This appears to be a portable miniature music centre, offering USB and iDevice functionality, plus a built-in rechargeable battery giving around five hours of operation.

Six top-mounted LEDs display sampling frequency, and there's a front fascia volume control – which sadly proved just a little too easy to accidentally move when out and about. Those on the Number 41 bus will doubtless prefer the ergonomic simplicity of, say, an Arcam rPAC or Cambridge Audio DacMagic XS, which are *truly* portable devices.

Build quality is superb, as you'd expect from a premium priced

and volume control. At the rear is a combined 3.5mm optical/analogue out and two flavours of USB input including iDevice connectivity. Sample rate and battery status are indicated via coloured LEDs.

OPEN WINDOW

The Furutech ADL X1 offers a wonderfully clean and open window onto any recording, with generous insights into the texture of instruments and vocals. And it does this without sounding bright or harsh in any sense.

Indeed if anything it has a deeper and 'darker', character than many competing units – it contrasts strongly with Fostex's HP-A4 [*HFN* May '14], which is very well lit. Nor does it have a thumpingly powerful nature, yet it still comes over as wonderfully engaging.

This was very obvious on Kate Bush's 'Snowflake' – the 96kHz/24-bit download version was used from her *50 Words For Snow* album [Fish People] –

which was rendered with a very believable tonality. The piano was deep and powerful, showing the ADL X1's strong but not over-prominent bass. Vocals were smooth and velvety – with scarcely any glassiness, and the phrasing was wonderfully subtle. The song gained a whole new level of emotional impact as a result.

'It offers a wonderfully clean and open window onto any recording'

Japanese product and it feels like a well presented, luxury item. In fact, the ADL X1 is basically a brushed aluminium case enclosed in a rubberised plastic shell. Inside it boasts a 192kHz/24-bit ESS ES9023 DAC – a very 'high-end' chip.

It sports a front 3.5mm line input and a 3.5mm headphone socket together with on/off switch

ABOVE: The ADL X1 is similar in size and style to an iPhone 4. The fascia has a volume control and ground switch besides its 3.5mm headphone and input sockets. The rear panel offers line-in, USB or iDevice connectivity, plus a combined optical digital and line output socket for good measure

David Bowie's 'Modern Love', from *Let's Dance* [EMI] was beautifully delivered, albeit not quite as 'impressive' in a hi-fi sense as with that ultra-punchy Fostex HP-A4. Still, drums sounded less splashy and carried more dynamic contrast. Vocals were smoother yet more believable, and the Furutech separated out the multiple elements of the mix in a more cohesive way, making it easier to hear the piano throughout.

Isaac Hayes' 'Bumpy's Lament' from *Shaft*, *OST* [Stax] took on wonderful warmth and fullness, and the Jon and Vangelis track 'I Hear You Now' from *The Best Of Jon And Vangelis* [Polydor] was also beautifully rendered, managing to convey the melody of the lead keyboards most convincingly. It's not a showy performer, but the ADL is nevertheless blessed with a wonderful subtlety that makes you want to keep on listening.

VERDICT

Aside from the on/off gain control which we found slightly fiddly, the ADL X1 is easy to move around and works as effectively as a portable as when it's sitting next to your home computer. The rechargeable battery system works well, and the design is not lacking in features.

However, the real ace in its hand is the sound, which is not just excellent, but 'special' in that – while it's not massively powerful [see our Lab Report, *HFN* May '14, page 47] – at sensible levels you get the sort of subtlety you only normally expect from high-end digital. It digs right down into a piece of music and brings every last bit to life, without ever sounding harsh or artificial. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (re. 1% THD into 47kohm)	1.61V
Max. power output (re. 1% THD into 25ohm)	100mW
Output Impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.84-1.11ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBfs)	81.3dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 10mW)	0.015-0.24%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/40kHz/90kHz)	-1.7 to -0.2/-0.6dB/-9.1dB
Stereo separation (20Hz-20kHz)	73dB to 86dB
Digital jitter (unloaded/loaded at 25ohm)	745psec / 670psec
Dimensions (WHD)	68x17x118mm



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Roy Gregory, The Audio Beat - July 2013

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Robert Harley, The Absolute Sound - September 2012

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Chris Thomas, Hifi+ - Issue 99



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The Audio Beat - July 2012



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TAD TAD-DA1000

Known originally for its professional studio speakers, Pioneer's Technical Audio Devices brand is now firmly established in high-end consumer audio.

Late last year, TAD announced the D1000 disc player/DAC and the DA1000 as a DAC-only alternative. Both offer the same DAC input options, but the DA1000 also includes a linear volume control, for direct connection to a power amp, and a separate headphone amplifier (fascia controlled for level). Both new models, says TAD, 'integrate a newly developed, ultra-high

'On classical tracks there was fabulous depth and scale of image'

accuracy master clock equivalent to that employed in the higher-level TAD D600' [HFN May '12].

Physically, though it lacks the dramatic V-fronted 'bow' of the D600, the DA1000 is still a true battleship, housed in an 8mm-thick pure aluminium chassis. Heavier components are placed in the bottom chassis, lowering the centre of gravity to reduce the effects of external vibrations, while power supply vibrations are minimised by mounting the supply within a thick-walled brass base.

Front-panel controls are discreet, almost hidden between the upper and lower bulwarks of the massive

casing. An input selector button cycles through the USB and four other digital inputs, while \pm Vol buttons control line output level.

As delivered, the USB input comes ready to play in its default mode, indicated on the display as U1. This supports USB Audio Class 1.0 and USB 2.0 high-speed and allows sample rates up to 96kHz. To explore the full potential of the DA1000, you need to switch to USB AudioClass 2.0 DoP mode, indicated by U2 on the display. This can handle 24-bit/192kHz and even 32-bit/384kHz data, and supports the DoP format for 'DSD over PCM'. However, the TAD-DA1000 always downsamples higher-rate audio inputs to 96kHz.

For set-up with a PC, you need to download an appropriate driver from the TAD website but if you're a Mac user, operation is plug 'n play.



EFFORTLESS

With downloaded 24-bit/96kHz material, mostly from HDtracks, the DA1000 seemed airy, transparent and simply able to let the music through in an unforced and natural way. It certainly brought orchestral music to life.

On one of the classical tracks from Chesky's 2013 sampler, Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Dance of the Tumblers', the DA1000 was able to give a fabulous depth and scale of image, with a really effortless sound from the big orchestra, and

ABOVE: Controls include volume buttons for line output and, far right, for the headphone output. Display shows input sample rate but can also display line or headphone level. Rear USB and coaxial/Toslink S/PDIF and AES/EBU digital ins are offered plus coaxial and XLR digital outs. There are also balanced and single-ended analogue outputs

an impressive display of air-moving sound from the timpani.

We were equally captivated by the 24-bit/96kHz presentation of Patricia Barber in 'The Wind Song', from her Concord Jazz album *Smash*. It was great to appreciate the real subtlety of the singing 'wind' sounds she somehow coaxes from the piano, starting off as a kind of soft breeze before bassist Larry Kohut and drummer Jon Deitemyer join in to build up the momentum, with an almost ridiculously big bass sound from Kohut that seems to leap up and over the soundstage. But nothing overpowered or diminished the sheer intensity of Barber's vocal delivery in this song.

Playing music ripped from CDs, the DA1000 displayed a creamy, smooth and full-bodied sound. In the tremendously atmospheric album *O Que Sera* by Bollani and de Holanda [ECM], the live, reverberant sound was truly invigorating as this virtuoso duo engaged in their most fantastic flights.

Listening to material recorded at the highest sampling rates, we got enjoyable results too, despite the fact that the DA1000 was downsampling them to 96kHz. Tony Faulkner's recordings of Dvořák and Rachmaninov still conveyed tremendous dynamics, with bottom-end power and extension providing a great musical foundation.

VERDICT

Matching a commanding physical presence with impeccable sonics, the TAD-DA1000 sounds inviting and unruffled across any media you throw at it. Its genuinely usable volume control means you only need a power amp to complete a very high-end system. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	4.10Vrms at 307ohm-2.79kohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB)	113.7dB / 113.6dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.0008% / 0.005%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.017% / 0.0046%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz)	-0.13dB to -0.0dB/-21.3dB
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz/USB)	30psec / 50psec / 30psec
Resolution @ -100dB (S/PDIF / USB)	\pm 0.1dB / \pm 0.2dB
Power consumption	25W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	440x150x406mm / 16.5kg



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Bryston BDP-2/BDA-2

Canadian audio manufacturer Bryston adopted a purist approach with its first computer audio product, the BDP-1 'digital player' [HFN Apr '11], this based on an ultra-minimalist computer with four USB sockets for memory sticks or external HDDs.

An enhanced model, the BDP-2 featured here has joined Bryston's line-up along with a new BDA-2 DAC which includes a 192kHz/24-bit capable asynchronous USB input. This uses proprietary firmware running on the XMOS USB audio micro-controller platform.

Bryston supplies the necessary driver software on a memory stick for Windows PC users (Macintosh supports USB Audio Class 2.0 with most devices). And where the cheaper BDA-1 had 24-bit Crystal CS4398 DACs in a dual-differential

balanced AES/EBU (XLR) and USB. Inputs can be selected directly via front-panel switches or Bryston's BR2 system remote controller. Input data is synchronously upsampled to either 176.4kHz (for 44.1kHz and 88.2kHz media) or to 192kHz (for 48kHz and 96kHz media).

Bryston's digital player is designed solely for replaying audio from file storage media connected to its USB sockets. It employs a linear power supply and a modified sound card with S/PDIF (BNC) and AES/EBU (XLR) digital outputs for connecting to any DAC of choice.

Bryston doesn't claim any sonic enhancements for its new BDP-2 digital player, just significantly improved connectivity and functionality. Under the bonnet is a new Intel Atom-powered motherboard offering three times the processing speed, an eight-

fold increase in system memory, and a more robust power supply.

SHARP FOCUS
 When playing the Sheffield Lab classic

The King James Version the DAC delivered the sound of the lead trumpet without any hint of strain, while faithfully preserving the instrument's sharp transients and dynamic power.

Similarly Diana Krall's sultry 'I've Got You Under My Skin' from *When I Look In Your Eyes* [Verve] was rendered with a richly saturated palette of tonal colours, the balance creamy and luscious, yet sharply

ABOVE: It's no looker, but Bryston's DAC [bottom] is nevertheless functional. A bank of LEDs shows sampling frequency, and this is set between the on/off switch and an eight-way input selector. The BDP-2 [top] has a connector for an eSATA drive and six USB sockets, plus Ethernet, RS232, 12V trigger and S/PDIF and AES/EBU digital outputs

focused, without the slowed-down feeling of 'laziness' that an overly-thick tonality can sometimes create.

With both these recordings we preferred them at their native sampling rate rather than upsampled, albeit the effect was subtle. But the effects of upsampling are entirely dependent on the recording itself. For example, tracks from Eric Clapton's *461 Ocean Boulevard* [Polydor] sounded typically compressed and overly processed, yet upsampled, the sizzling guitars appeared less peaky and better defined.

We then set about listening to the BDA-2 using the BDP-2 digital player as a source. Would it blow our computer set-up away? No – but the BDP-2 *did* sound marginally more precise and transparent. With top-drawer audiophile recordings it delineated instrumental lines with greater ease, and allowed music to flow and breathe with a compellingly engaging naturalness.

Of particular note was the player's imperturbable dynamic stability. Even during big crescendos the BDP-2 maintained a consistent perspective with instruments anchored in the soundfield. Played via a computer through the BDA-2 DAC, the performance exhibited minor sonic artefacts during peaks, adding glare and projecting the sound slightly forwards.

VERDICT

If you owned the BDP-2 and BDA-2 you might find the latter's USB input superfluous, as hi-res files played by the BDP-2 are likely to be noticeably superior to those from a laptop or computer. And some audiophiles might even welcome its simplicity and limited functionality. ☺

'Of particular note was the BDP-2 player's imperturbable stability'

configuration, the BDA-2 has 32-bit AKM AK4399 DACs.

As with all its audio components, Bryston places great store in its proprietary discrete Class A analogue output circuitry, eschewing off-the-shelf chip-based op-amps, for both its single-ended and balanced outputs.

There are no fewer than eight digital inputs – six S/PDIF (two Toslink, two RCA, two BNC), a

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	3.94Vrms at 70-75ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB)	113.8dB / 113.6dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.00012% / 0.00025%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0015% / 0.00035%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.05dB/-1.2dB/-7.3dB
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz/USB)	12psec / 11psec / 13psec
Resolution @ -100dB (S/PDIF / USB)	±0.2dB / ±0.3dB
Power consumption (BDP-2/BDA-2)	22W / 9W (2W standby)
Dimensions (WHD)	432x70x282mm (each)

**AUDIO
FILE**

Digital media player with optional internal DAC
Made by: Krell Industries LLC, Orange, CT, USA
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd, UK
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.krellonline.com; www.absolutesounds.com
Price: £3500 (£2500 without DAC)



Krell Connect

Krell announced at the Las Vegas CES its intention to introduce a UPnP/DLNA-compliant network media player and the rather aptly named Connect is now available in the UK.

There are in fact two versions of Krell's Connect player, the one featured here having an optional built-in DAC with balanced (XLR) and single-ended (RCA) analogue outputs. Needless to say it is vastly overbuilt compared with most music streamers!

At its core lies a familiar BridgeCo-based StreamUnlimited platform including vTuner internet radio functionality. Massive power supplies have always been the cornerstone of Krell designs, and the Connect has an over-specified linear power supply with a 94VA toroidal transformer large enough to power a modest amplifier.

The on-board converter section uses ESS Technology's flagship ES9018 Sabre 32-bit DAC chipset and has a fully discrete balanced

The Connect's minimalist fascia sports no controls other than a standby on/off button, the unit coming with a chunky aluminium handset that provides navigation and transport keys for playing/pausing/skipping selected music files. Of course, your computer or NAS drive requires server software in order for a network player to access music files; Krell suggests using Twonky Server (available for Windows and Mac OS X). The Connect will render WAV and FLAC files up to 192kHz/24-bit along with WMA, Apple Lossless, MP4A and MP3 file formats.

A FABULOUS SOUND

The Connect is an extremely supple and expressive digital player. With good recordings it delivers really meaty and deeply extended bass, and refined high frequencies without any hardness or glare.

Listening to *Quiet Winter Night* by the Hoff Ensemble [2L] revealed that via wireless connection the Connect delivered a marginally softer-focused image of the musicians in the church venue than by wired Ethernet hook-up.

But with a selection of tracks played from a flash drive, using the Connect's USB input, sound quality moved into overdrive. If the Connect already sounded great when streaming files via the network, now the performance was even better, both spatially and tonally, with soundstage cues more apparent and subtle tonal hues more fleshed out. It gave a sense of 'being there' with the performers.

ABOVE: New styling matches Krell's Foundation AV preamp/processor. File navigation is via a 3.5in LCD screen and the Connect's IR handset. Single-ended and balanced (XLR) analogue outputs are provided at the rear, along with RCA and Toslink digital outputs, and a USB type-A socket for flash drives

Hearing a naturally lifelike rendering by sound engineering veteran Barry Diamant, proprietor of Soundkeeper Recordings (who likes to capture musicians playing live and record them directly to stereo at 192kHz/24-bit), showed just how capable the Connect's DAC is at delivering the *feel* of a performance, preserving both the musical balance and dynamics.

His 'Dragon Boats' from Work Of Art's *Lift* album also highlighted the Connect's delightful midrange purity and outstanding bass extension, with no bloat or overhang. Image scale and focus were exceptional, the musicians presented as a seamless spread of images across the soundstage. It sounded simply fabulous at 192kHz/24-bit resolution, with improved image depth and more finely-described harmonic textures.

We revisited several ripped tracks from the CD version of Carlos Franzetti's *The Jazz Kamerata* [Chesky]. These beautiful recordings – with so much space you feel you could walk up to the jazz ensemble and shake hands with the musicians in turn – sounded exquisite.

As a 'transport-only' music streamer the Connect might be considered a sledgehammer to crack a nut. But with the DAC on board it certainly makes for a network audio player perfectly suited to a high-end system.

VERDICT

It's a pity Krell has not included digital inputs for legacy sources but, via network and especially USB, the Connect sounds bold and confident with CD-res files. Moreover, it delivers the high-end goods when rendering high-res recordings. ☺

'With a flash drive and USB input, sound quality moved into overdrive'

analogue output stage employing Krell's Current Mode topology.

At the rear are three mini-jack sockets. Two are 12V triggers, the third is for an external IR receiver. There is also a solitary A-Type USB input for direct playback of files from 'local storage' such as a USB hard drive or memory stick. These must be formatted for the FAT32 file system, not NTFS.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	4.03Vrms at 164ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio	110.8dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/–30dBfs)	0.0020% / 0.0012%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/–30dBfs)	0.0025% / 0.0028%
Freq. resp. (20Hz–20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0dB to –0.14dB/–0.9dB/–2.2dB
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz/192kHz)	100psec / 65psec / 105psec
Resolution @ –100dB	±0.5dB
Power consumption	25W (4W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	433x88x428mm / 8.2kg



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of sound that seems scarcely
credible from such a small cabinet"*

What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision, March 2013



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Speaker Stand:
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The 'Concept 20' is a special loudspeaker which goes beyond anything that Q Acoustics has achieved before. It's a beautifully styled product which we confidently believe provides a level of sonic performance previously thought impossible at its price point.

To achieve this extraordinary result, Q Acoustics' design team applied advanced technology to address the fundamental problem of cabinet resonance; widely recognised as the single biggest hurdle preventing 'high end' sonic performance at an 'affordable' price.

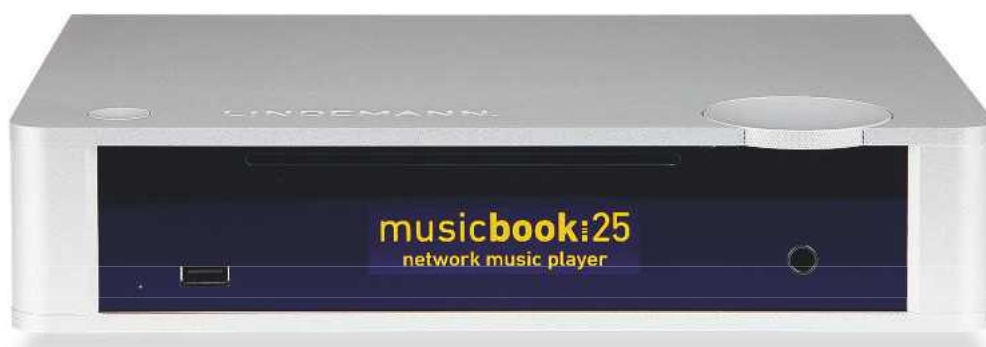
The 'Concept 20' proves cabinet resonance need be a problem no longer.

Its Gelcore™ Construction; 'cabinet within a cabinet' design, incorporates a bespoke, resonance absorbing, non-setting adhesive which converts kinetic energy and disperses it as heat. This substantially reduces distortion and allows the individual drive units to deliver their optimal performance.

www.Qacoustics.co.uk

AUDIO
FILE

Network media/CD player/DAC
Made by: Lindemann audiotechnik GmbH, Germany
Supplied by: Audio Emotion Ltd, Scotland
Telephone: 01333 425999
Web: www.lindemann-audio.com; www.audioemotion.co.uk
Price: £3890



Lindemann Musicbook 25

Lindemann audiotechnik, a boutique brand from Germany, has focused on high-end music replay for the past 20 years. It was one of the world's first high-end brands to offer an outboard USB-to-S/PDIF converter for connecting a computer to a DAC. And it was also quick off the mark to make a USB-equipped DAC.

Identifying a new trend for 'downsizing' complicated audio rigs, it has developed a range of four midi-sized – if expensive – products dubbed Musicbook. Extremely handsome they look too, housed in 6.5mm-thick aluminium cases boasting immaculate fit 'n' finish

'Alison Krauss's voice was depicted exquisitely in the deep soundstage'

and with added-value OLED displays that lend a serious touch of class.

The £3890 Musicbook 25 is a 'streaming preamp' with added CD playback functionality. A near-invisible slot-in CD mechanism sits above the front panel's display screen. All four Musicbook front ends are identically equipped with four digital inputs for other sources and, being fully-fledged analogue preamplifiers, two single-ended (RCA) analogue inputs – enough for a phono amplifier and an FM tuner

or old tape deck, say. They also feature discrete Class A headphone amplifiers whose volume can be controlled remotely.

You can control almost everything from the minimalist front panel – volume, input, mute the output, stop/eject a CD. But to navigate tracks on a CD you'll need to use the accompanying rechargeable remote controller – or Lindemann's Musicbook control app. Lindemann's free control apps for iOS and Android are of course essential for navigating and playing music files over the network.

Gapless playback is supported with WAV, AIFF, FLAC, ALAC and MP3 files. Streaming 192kHz/24-bit files requires a wired Ethernet connection but this is limited to 96kHz/24-bit via WLAN. Naturally the UPnP/DLNA network

player functionality includes access to internet radio stations.



ADMIRABLY VOICED

We marginally preferred the sound of the Musicbook 25's CD playback to streaming music via our home network, A/B comparisons revealing a slight muting of dynamic contrasts and softening of transients.

But this preference was turned on its head when listening to hi-res audio files. For example, 'Oh Daddy' and 'The Chain' from Fleetwood

ABOVE: A top wheel controls many functions but you'll drive it via its control app. USB port allows playback from FAT 16/32 formatted HDD and memory sticks, etc. Four S/PDIF and two RCA analogue inputs should be adequate for most requirements; power amp connection can be balanced or single-ended

Mac's *Rumours* [Warner] appeared a smidgen more vivid and vital via CD than playing ripped WAV files pulled from my 'digital library' via LAN and rendered by the Musicbook's network player. But this marginal subjective difference was made irrelevant when streaming the laughably superior 96kHz/24-bit version ripped from a copy of the 2001 DVD-Audio release.

The longer we listened to the Musicbook 25 the more we grew to admire its voicing, its invitingly warm balance and delicate treble: not *too* smooth or over-sweetened. This meant that the sharp attack of Stevie Ray Vaughan's evergreen 'Tin Pan Alley' from *Couldn't Stand The Weather* [Epic Legacy] had plenty of energy, the leading-edge bite of the guitar sharply etched and angry.

Thanks to the player's smooth and relaxed demeanour female vocals fared particularly well. Alison Krauss' 'Paper Airplane' [Rounder] was a fine exemplar of the Lindemann's ability to serve up a three-dimensional image, with her voice depicted exquisitely in the deep soundstage.

Skimming through a selection of hi-res recordings confirmed the Musicbook's compatibility with all sampling rates up to 192kHz. It also showed that it was more than capable of corroborating the benefits of increased resolutions.

VERDICT

The Musicbook 25 sounds highly civilised, with a rich midband and pleasing treble. Considering the build quality, comprehensive functionality and pleasingly compact form, it crafts a pretty esoteric hi-fi experience and is warmly recommended. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	3.95Vrms at 97ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio	107.8dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0009% / 0.0004%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.00045% / 0.0005%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.3dB
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz/192kHz)	12psec / 15psec / 18psec
Resolution @ -100dB	±0.1dB
Power consumption	12W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	280x65x220mm / 3.5kg

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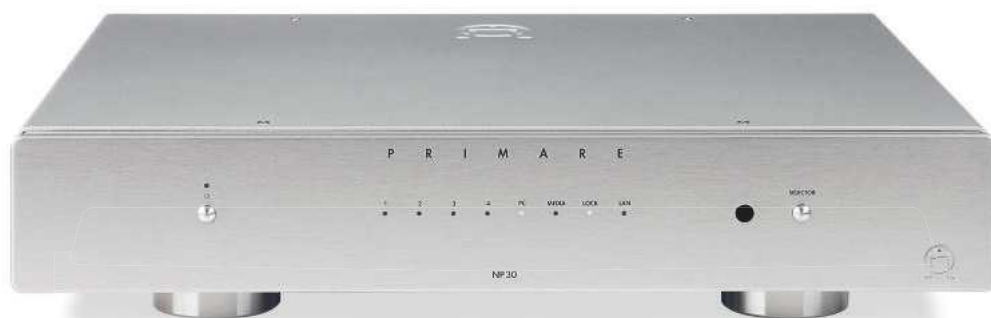
AUGUST 2014

monitoraudio.com

 **MONITOR AUDIO**

AUDIO
FILE

Network-enabled media player/USB DAC
Made by: Primare AB, Sweden
Supplied by: Karma-AV Ltd
Telephone: 01423 358846
Web: www.primare.net; www.karma-av.co.uk
Price: £2000



Primare NP30

When Primare set out to develop its I32 integrated amplifier a few years ago (and sibling PRE32 preamp) it also designed in an expansion slot for an optional media streaming and DAC board dubbed the MM30.

That optional MM30 'media board' PCB forms the heart of the NP30 network media player/DAC. It's based around a UPnP/DLNA network streaming module from German supplier Audivo. Playback of music files up to 192kHz/24-bit is supported via wired Ethernet LAN, with gapless playback of segued tracks, along with internet radio using the familiar vTuner platform.

Wi-Fi connectivity is also included, but via WLAN you're restricted to a maximum resolution of 48kHz/16-bit. The NP30 also functions as a DAC for additional

Of course, the NP30 is designed primarily to be a streamer – but you might want to push in data directly from a computer. So Primare uses the well-established XMOS microprocessor interface for the NP30's asynchronous USB input. USB Audio Class 1.0 functionality is a straightforward matter of plug and play with all computers, while USB Audio Class 2.0 is also natively supported for Mac OS X. Drivers need to be downloaded from Primare's website and installed on PCs running Windows OS.

A fascia button scrolls through the inputs, LEDs confirming the selection. Inputs and volume up/down can also be governed by the new C24 IR system remote (it controls most Primare components).

Primare has developed a free app to control its 'connected' components using an iOS or Android device. Any standard UPnP application can be used to browse your media server and play files, but you really need Primare's app to configure the NP30 and to access features such as

input switching, volume, etc.



CLEAR DELINEATION
Primare's NP30 sounded every bit as good when streaming as when used as a standalone DAC and we could discern little or no difference in sound between the two methods.

It served up a commendably wide and deep soundstage when playing top quality recordings, while maintaining a clear delineation of instruments and voices. Malcolm

ABOVE: Available in black as well as a titanium finish, the NP30's aluminium front panel simply has two buttons for standby on/off and source selection with accompanying input LEDs

Arnold's joyous *A Sussex Overture* [Reference Recordings] sounded generously proportioned and convincingly three-dimensional. The NP30's sonic and musical delivery appeared effortless during the performance's climactic dynamic swings, with wall-to-wall soundstaging and precise focus. Massed strings were delicately articulated with a pleasing sense of space around the performers and sections of the orchestra.

Moving to something altogether 'manufactured', we challenged the NP30 to play the 'Chicken Farmer Song' by Swedish prog-rockers The Flower Kings, from *Space Revolver* [Inside Out Music]. It confirmed our impression of the NP30's apparent calmness under pressure and showed its ability to dig deeply into densely populated collages.

The multiple layers of guitars, swirling synthesizers and intricately woven vocal tracks were surprisingly well depicted given the 'thickening' compression during the song's more ambitious passages. The pumping rhythm section of Jonas Reingold and Hasse Bruniusson reinterpreted the whirlwind proceedings well, helping to make sense of what can easily become cacophonous.

VERDICT

Overall we found the NP30's sound to have been skilfully balanced, its gentle softening at the frequency extremes imbuing the NP30 with a touch of 'golden glow' that made even low-bitrate internet radio tolerable. When rendering lossless CD-quality (and better) music files Primare's NP30 proved that a well-implemented network player is more than capable of offering audiophile-quality replay. ☺

'It sounded every bit as good when streaming as when used as a DAC'

digital sources in a system. It sports four S/PDIF inputs (three Toslink; one RCA), an asynchronous USB-B input, and a further USB-A socket at the rear for playback from a FAT32-formatted memory stick. This socket is also compatible with iDevices.

The NP30 is housed in Primare's familiar heavyweight steel chassis supported on three isolation feet and with a brushed aluminium fascia, and looks almost identical to its excellent DAC30 [HFN Feb '13].

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	2.07Vrms at 137ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB)	108.2dB / 107.9dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.005% / 0.00053%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.0028% / 0.0008%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.4dB/-2.7dB/-14dB
Digital jitter (S/PDIF / USB / network)	<10psec / <10psec / <20psec
Resolution @ -100dB	±0.3dB
Power consumption	13W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	430x95x370mm / 8.5kg



CD player/DAC and integrated amp. Rated at 2x120W/4ohm
 Made by: Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH, Berlin
 Supplied by: Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH
 Telephone: +49 30 787 968 0
 Web: www.burmester.de/en
 Prices: £4357/£5088

AUDIO
FILE



Burmester 102/101

Many designers have tried to give their products a unique visual identity, but few have succeeded as well as Dieter Burmester. The 101 integrated amplifier and 102 CD player/DAC comprise Burmester's current entry-level range, the latter a slim standard-sized unit, which would look conventional if it weren't for all that chrome.

Behind its shiny metal front, the CD drawer has a plastic tray, but it operates with a solid and reassuring precision when you touch the leftmost button on the fascia. The fascia button marked 'Audio' switches the player's upsampling between 96kHz and 192kHz, and another switches between coaxial and optical digital inputs.

'The combination really could give weight and scale to a concert grand'

Functional as it is, the display is rather basic: it won't show sample rate information, for example. Handset-only CD functions include direct track selection and programmed play using the numeric keypad, track or whole-disc repeat, display dimming and fast-forward or reverse search. (Burmester's metal-bodied system controller will also operate volume and source selection on the 101 amplifier.)

Turning to the back panel, there is a Toslink optical input, but the only electrical digital input is a coaxial (phono) connector, so to use the 102 with computer sources you will need a suitable USB-to-S/PDIF adapter. For analogue output, there are Burmester's usual balanced connectors as well as unbalanced (RCA) phonos, plus a second pair of these as a record output.

The 101 Class D integrated amp is slim and compact too. Once again, the fascia is immaculate, the controls clean-looking and straightforward, with all legends engraved rather than silk-screened. The superbly-finished volume knob is a 'proper' old-fashioned rotary control – motorised, it works very sweetly from the up and down keys on the remote. Once again,

a neat row of control buttons is punctuated by the remote-control IR receiver window, and alongside this is a headphone jack. The fascia button 'Smooth'

is a form of subtle loudness compensation for low level replay.



POISE AND POWER

Once warmed up, the Burmester combination showed its sheer class on every kind of music we tried. We plunged into Stevie Ray Vaughan and 'Ain't Gone 'n' Give Up On Love' from *The Real Deal: Greatest Hits 2* [Epic]. The sound was poised and powerful, with massive bass and

punchy drums behind SRV's creamy, purring vocal and stinging guitar.

Although the 102 CD player allows you to switch its upsampling on the fly, Burmester recommends sticking with 96kHz. But after repeated trials with 'Kalerka' from Rebecca Pidgeon's *The Raven* [Chesky] we felt that the 192kHz setting was giving just a little more luminosity to the vocal, and it seemed a little easier to follow the rather buried rhythm guitar pattern.

On a Tony Faulkner orchestral recording, Rachmaninov *Symphonic Dances*, we were impressed by the Burmester's ability to provide flawless deep bass, conjuring up almost subterranean sounds from a truly black and hash-free background. And we found that the 102/101 combination could really give convincing weight and scale to a concert grand piano – we really enjoyed Patrick O'Byrne playing Ravel on Stockfish Records.

'La Vallée des Cloches', showed off the bottom-end of the piano to great effect, the lowest notes, the most distant and solemn clock bells perhaps, sounding full of substance.

On a good live recording, the Burmesters could really give you the space and ease of a concert venue, as with *Quercus*, by the group of this name [ECM]. June Tabor's voice is heard enveloped by the acoustic of the hall, but there's a closer view of piano where the sonority of its low notes was very well presented.

VERDICT

This is a powerful and smooth-sounding combination, strong on precision but not lacking warmth. In terms of material content and engineering quality, it offers better value than many a competitor. ☺

ABOVE: Although the 102 player [top unit] has optical and S/PDIF coaxial digital inputs, a rear USB connector is for system control only. Balanced outputs match the CD inputs on the 101 amp, one of its three balanced-only line inputs. There's a classy remote for use with both the 101 (inc. motorised volume control) and 102

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	140W / 245W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	170W / 330W / 480W / 220W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, CD/Amp)	64ohm / 0.001–0.45ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–20kHz, CD/Amp)	+0.0 to –0.13dB / –0.25 to +0.71dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (CD/Amp)	113.1dB (0dBfs) / 74.0dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, CD/Amp)	0.0014–0.015% / 0.0041–0.082%
Digital jitter (CD / S/PDIF)	116psec / 10psec
Power consumption (CD/Amp)	12W/290W (22W idle)
Dimensions (WHD, CD/Amp)	482x95x320mm/482x93x350mm

AUDIO
FILE

HDD media player and integrated amp. Rated at 2x80W/8ohm
Made by: Sony Corporation, Tokyo, Japan
Supplied by: Sony Europe, Weybridge
Telephone: 0207 365 2413
Web: www.sony.co.uk
Price: £2000 (each)



Sony HAP-Z1ES/ TA-A1ES

Sony has returned to pure, two-channel, high fidelity sound; there's an initiative to bring hi-fi replay back to the top of its consumers' must-have wish lists. And it has produced a raft of new products focused around hi-res computer audio.

All are compatible with files up to 24-bit/192kHz and, of course, DSD downloads. *HFN* was first in line to sample the 'Elevated Standard' HAP-Z1ES digital music file player featuring a built-in 1TB HDD, and

'The two ES components together make for a very persuasive system'

its partnering TA-A1ES integrated amplifier rated at 80W/8ohm.

The HAP-Z1ES is *not* a UPnP/DLNA network audio player. Yes, it connects to a home network via wired Ethernet or Wi-Fi, and it provides internet radio using the vTuner platform. However, playback of music files is directly from its HDD/local storage. (A rear USB port allows you add a supplementary external drive to expand capacity.)

Sony provides a small PC/Mac utility, called HAP Music Transfer, for moving files that you've downloaded to your computer. With it you can set the HAP-Z1ES to 'watch' folders on your computer and transfer files automatically at periodic intervals.

One of the HAP-Z1ES's unique selling points is that it 'upsamples' all file types to 5.6MHz DSD (DSD128) on the fly, but this can be disabled if you prefer your 24/96 and 192kHz PCM files left intact.

Sony's all-new integrated amp is a tasty £2k's-worth with a fairly meaty power supply on-board. Dual-mono in layout, the TA-A1ES really is ultra-purist, with no emitter resistors, coils or capacitors in the signal line. It also includes a separate headphone amplifier.



SUPERB TRANSPARENCY

We were bowled over by the open and crystal-clear sound of the ES amplifier. It sounded relaxed and confident, with an inviting midband and natural, sparkling high frequencies free of grain and edginess. Its bass was powerful,

extended and extremely well controlled. Playing Norwegian pianist Jan Gunnar Hoff's acoustic jazz project, the *Quiet Winter Night* album [2L], demonstrated fabulous detail, providing ample evidence of the amplifier's superb transparency.

The HAP-Z1ES is certainly refined and super-clean sounding, with a 'pure' and delicate treble quality. But we thought it a tad soft-focused and laid-back, with a subjectively reticent bass delivery. But, putting the two ES components together, the player's slight leanness and lack of verve were ameliorated to a degree by the amplifier's clarity and dynamic clout. Together they make for a very persuasive system.

It proved perfectly able to reveal subtle differences in file quality. Improvements in authority, grip, pitch definition, tonal shading and ambient detail were all apparent with higher sample rate media.

And what sonic effect does the 'X1' player have in converting PCM files to DSD? Hearing its excellent sound quality when playing a rip of Patricia Barber's *Companion* [Blue Note], there was no way you would know you were listening to a PCM-to-DSD conversion. With good recordings Sony's new ES components sound just wonderful. In 'Bye Bye Blackbird' the instruments and Barber's voice were depicted exquisitely in 'holographic stereo', the drum kit tangible and the acoustic palpable.

VERDICT

The HDD player offers excellent functionality, the amplifier sounds fabulous, and as a duo they're a most capable partnership, boasting solid build and handsome design. Tremendous value too. ☺

ABOVE: Brushed aluminium front panels are an exemplar of modern minimalism and both components can be operated using their fascia control keys. The HAP-Z1ES offers single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) analogue outs with a wired Ethernet input and USB port for an external HDD

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	112W / 180W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	125W / 245W / 45W / 31W
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz, HDD/Amp)	220ohm / 0.066-0.078ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz, HDD/Amp)	+0.0 to -0.01dB / +0.00 to +0.01dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (HDD/Amp)	109.5dB (0dBfs) / 90.8dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, HDD/Amp)	0.0001-0.003% / 0.0040-0.045%
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz/192kHz)	11psec / 10psec / 19psec
Power consumption (HDD/Amp)	21W/337W (50-150W idle)
Dimensions (WHD, HDD/Amp)	430x130x390mm/435x108x365mm



Integrated amplifier. Rated at 125W/8ohm
 Made by: Ayre Acoustics Inc., Colorado, USA
 Supplied by: Symmetry Systems, Herts
 Telephone: 01727 865488
 Web: www.ayre.com; www.symmetry-systems.co.uk
 Price: £7895

AUDIO FILE



Ayre AX-5

In some ways the AX-5 represents a distillation of Ayre's 'purist' philosophies, as it employs both the company's 'Diamond output circuit' and the elaborately-designed volume control trickled down from its flagship KX-R Twenty preamplifier.

In the fully-balanced zero loop feedback AX-5 integrated, Ayre eliminated the preamp stage altogether and simply made the gain of the power amplifier directly adjustable using VGT (Variable Gain Transimpedance). The volume knob on the right of the fascia acts as an encoder to control a pair of motor-driven Shallco silver-contact rotary switches (one for each channel, conjoined using toothed belts), each of which contains dozens of hand-selected, low-noise resistors.

Volume level can be adjusted over a range of 69dB in 46 steps of 1.5dB (steps which we did find a bit

'It delivered a beguiling fluidity, with a fine definition to instruments'

coarse). A single resistor mounted in a terminal block governs the AX-5's overall gain range and can easily be changed should the need arise, to accommodate overly-sensitive or insensitive partnering loudspeakers.

While it works flawlessly, the amplifier's elaborate stepper motor system results in a 'clunk' each time the volume is adjusted. We soon came to ignore it.

Befitting its price the AX-5's sculpted aluminium chassis is reassuringly robust and beautifully finished. It sports a large and easy-to-read status display while microprocessor control allows its six line inputs (four balanced, two single-ended) to be individually enabled and custom-named to match source components.

Naturally the AX-5's front panel display can be dimmed or disabled via the handset. However, some enthusiasts might bemoan the absence of a balance control, phase inversion or a mono switch. And if your cables have 4mm banana plugs note that the amplifier's Cardas binding posts are designed for spade connectors.

WONDERFUL DETAIL

From the outset we were struck by its refreshingly clear and open sound. Despite appearing luscious and smooth in tonality, easy-going and warmly-balanced, the sound was still incredibly detailed.

It proved wonderful at peeling away the layers of heavily multi-tracked rock albums, the AX-5 bringing out low-level details in exhilarating fashion. We were captivated listening to *Beneath The Waves* by Kompendium [96kHz/24-bit DVD-A; 7 Stones/Tigermoth], the amplifier providing a sparkingly clean window through which to observe individual elements of the music's arrangements and myriad production effects. Percussion

ABOVE: Rotary encoders are for source selection and volume, plus navigation of the setup menu when in standby. Push buttons are for tape output on/off and mute/standby. Rear Cardas speaker terminals are joined by four balanced and two single-ended line inputs, plus tape out XLRs. RJ-11 sockets provide 'AyreLink' system comms

details were beautifully rendered and natural-sounding, while further down the frequency scale the intense vocals of Steve Balsamo were particularly well projected beyond the plane of our monitors.

Henley's *Building The Perfect Beast* album came next – Mo-Fi's 'Ultradisc II' remaster [UDCD 705]. This contains a busy assemblage of electric percussion bouncing between the channels to make up its joyous beat, the song soon deteriorating into a cacophony if not kept in check by a 'sympathetic' replay system. The AX-5 didn't fully pull its punches to conceal the recording's shortcomings, but we were left convinced of the Ayre's transparency as a consequence.

Meanwhile it proved adept at serving up infectious rhythms, delivered with a beguiling musical fluidity and a fine sense of 'body' and definition to instruments. Bass lines were fast and detailed, the midrange well projected and enticingly warm while its treble was free of grain or splashiness.

Thanks to the amplifier's supreme clarity, stereo imaging was exceptional when auditioning audiophile-quality recordings containing realistic spatial elements, with outstanding inner detailing. Moreover the AX-5's neutral honesty rendered brass in an appropriately aggressive manner – as, for example, in Stravinsky's *Rite Of Spring* with Maazel [Telarc].

VERDICT

The AX-5 is a lovely amplifier to use thanks to its large display, customisable input naming and illuminated handset. It delivers fabulous detail and musical insights and really is a class act. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	130W / 225W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	159W / 280W / 215W / 125W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.164–0.170ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	–0.01dB to +0.04dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/125W)	70mV / 815mV (Balanced in)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/125W)	102.4dB / 123.4dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.0095–0.023% (max vol, '46')
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	160W/480W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	440x120x480mm / 21kg

AUDIO FILE

Integrated valve amplifier. Rated at 35W/8ohm
Made by: Canor Audio spol., Slovakia
Supplied by: Sound Foundations, UK
Telephone: 01276 501392
Web: www.canor-audio.com; www.soundfoundations.co.uk
Price: £2495



Canor TP134

Longstanding Slovakian tube specialist Canor is based in Prešov, in a purpose-built factory where it builds everything in-house and has developed a proprietary valve-testing and burn-in methodology. Valves that don't measure up, we're told, are returned to their makers for use in guitar amps and the like.

The company traded for many years as Edgar until changing its brand name to Canor at the end of 2007. Its inaugural integrated tube amp, the TP101 was first shown in 1995 at an exhibition in Brno. It currently makes just two integrated amplifiers and two phono stages, a headphone amp and two CD players also with valve output stages.

Under its wrap-over bonnet the ultralinear push-pull TP134 uses a complement of four 12AT7s (ECC81s) and two pairs of EL34 output pentodes. The PCBs are

took over a year, says Canor), while the amplifier's control electronics are fed from an entirely separate power supply. Moreover, this logic circuitry is only active when it is being used. The remote control unit includes transport controls for any accompanying Canor CD player.

The TP134 is rated at 35W and claimed to operate as a Class A amplifier up to 10W/channel. In our lab tests we found it a very clean-performing tube amp, incurring minimal hum and offering an impressive 88dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW). The practical power output was higher than Canor suggested at a generous 45W into 8/4ohm loads (continuous) and 50W 8/4/2ohm (dynamic), all at less than 1% THD. The frequency response was also impressively flat and extended.



ADMIRABLE CLARITY

The TP134 we felt deserved high praise for its subjective performance too. Hearing the vivid portrayal of the Trondheim Soloists with performer Marianne Thorsen in Mozart's Violin

Concerto, K218 [a 192kHz/24-bit download from Norway's 2L label] demonstrated the Canor's ability to portray clearly the natural acoustic of this high resolution recording and preserve its fine detail without any softness or veiling.

Indeed, its designers seem to have struck an ideal balance which renders plenty of verve and energy

to the sound without incurring any harshness or grain by way of penalty. We listened to 'Lone Star' by The Carl Verheyen Band from the Rumor Mill DVD-Audio project released in 2005, a 96kHz/24-bit recording produced by Mark Waldrep [AIX Records].

This provides a stern test for any amplifier thanks to the dynamically lifelike sound of Verheyen (who's best known for his guitar duties in the band Supertramp) playing with Cliff Hugo and Bernie Dresel on bass and drums.

While it didn't sound quite as ballsy or 'grippy' as the Icon Audio Stereo 60 we used by way of reference [HFN Apr '14] when serving up the dynamic kick drum on this track, it remained commendably fulsome in the bass nonetheless – and sounded deliciously open and airy too.

'Carousel', from the *Lifesigns* CD [Esoteric Antenna], is an epic prog-rock extravaganza that's a challenge for any amplifier to reproduce, such is the density of its multi-layered instrumentation. But the TP134 nonetheless proved adept at separating out the myriad synthesizer and guitar tracks from the dense mix, and yielded an admirable hear-through clarity.

VERDICT

This valve integrated straddles the romanticised view of traditional 'valve-sound' with a more modern, crisp presentation and serves up wide and open images of musicians performing in space. It provides remote control input switching as well as volume control; and it can certainly form the central hub of a high-end hi-fi system that won't break the bank. ☺

ABOVE: The amp is available in black (as here) or silver, the fascia sporting a solitary multi-function knob for input selection and volume control. At the rear there are five line inputs and a fixed-level 'Tape' output, all on gold-plated RCA sockets. Speaker binding posts provide 4ohm and 8ohm taps

'There's an ideal balance with verve and energy to the sound without grain'

purposely milled to remove unnecessary areas of the circuit board and minimise dielectric loss. This is a patented process which Canor says gives its circuit similar characteristics to one hard-wired with air dielectric cables.

Volume control is via a relay attenuator rather than a potentiometer (its development

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4/2ohm)	44W / 45W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	51W / 52W / 50W / 40W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.74–1.05ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–20kHz)	–0.02dB to –0.01dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/35W)	59mV / 355mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/35W)	87.9dB / 103.3dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.11–0.77%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	145W / 227W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	435x170x390mm / 22kg



Xtension 9 SuperPack

The Xtension 9 SuperPack from Pro-Ject Audio Systems represents one of the finest high-end turntable packages available today. Drawing inspiration from Pro-Ject's first ever 'money-no-option' turntable, the Xtension 12, this streamlined version boasts advanced technologies and phenomenal value for money. The high-gloss plinth (available in Black, Red or White) is an MDF construction filled with metal granulate, making it high-mass and non-resonant just like the platter, which is made from a special alloy lined with Thermo-Plastic Elastomers and topped with recycled vinyl records. The whole turntable is magnetically decoupled from a rack by three specially designed feet.

The Xtension 9 SuperPack's motor efficiency is improved by the built-in speed control module, and the whole package is finished off by the stunning 9CC Evolution Tonearm and pre-fitted Ortofon Quintet Black.

Available in the UK for **£2,200** (UK SRP)

AUDIO FILE

Integrated amplifier. Rated at 2x110W/8ohm
Made by: Exposure Electronics, Lancing, UK
Supplied by: Exposure Electronics
Telephone: 01273 423877
Web: www.exposurehifi.com
Price: £1495



Exposure 3010S2

Exposure Electronics was founded by John Farlowe in 1974 and has remained committed to two-channel music reproduction. The company is largely famous for its big black pre/power amplifier combinations of the 1980s, when it sold to people who wanted punchy solid-state amps that sounded smoother and creamier than rival Naim products.

Nowadays, the sound hasn't changed much but the size has, and most of its wares are more affordable products such as this one – Exposure's top integrated. The 3010S2 series comprises a CD player, mono and stereo power amps, a preamplifier and a phono amp. The integrated is available with silver or black casework.

It's a nice device, with a decent finish and clear ergonomics that contrast with the fiddly nature of some UK-designed models. Styling is pretty conventional – its fascia is a thick slab of brushed aluminium and

signal and power supply paths short. Cascode circuitry is used for improved power supply immunity, says Exposure, and there are high quality relays fitted in the preamp section with high-speed bipolar transistors in the output stage.

Our lab tests revealed distortion decreasing slightly as the amp warmed up. As for power output, the 3010S2 beat its rated 110W at 2x135W and 2x225W into 8/4ohm loads. Output is short-circuit protected and output impedance is also usefully lower than with previous-generation Exposure amps.

A NATURAL EASE

Right from the off, the Exposure proved a highly impressive performer, offering a well-rounded tonality. As well as its even-handed balance, it was big-hearted and bold too – the stereo soundstage was spacious and the amp had lots of easily delivered power on tap.

The result was an expansive rendition of Peter Gabriel's 'Humdrum' from the Virgin album *Peter Gabriel 1* (a clean, even and dry 1977 rock recording carefully transcribed from the analogue master tape).

But it wasn't all about size, because the 3010S2 also had delicacy and detail in spades. The rich, sonorous timbre of the piano was lovely, the instrument coming across in all its ringing glory.

The all-electronic 4hero track 'Universal Love', from *Parallel Universe* [Selector], offers a powerful slice of drum and bass music that blends warm-sounding

ABOVE: This is a rather minimalist looking amp: source selection and volume knobs are your lot. However, they have a fine, silky action and the brushed alloy fascia looks sleek. In addition to six RCA line inputs, the Exposure's back panel offers two sets of preamp outputs for bi-wiring, and two pairs of speaker outputs, plus IEC mains in

analogue synthesisers with powerful electronic beats and a pile-driving sub-bass. It is an exhaustive workout for any integrated amplifier but it didn't change our impression of the 3010S2 – here we had a crisp and open midband able to throw up every element of the mix into sharp relief, but it didn't sound edgy or forced in any way. Rather, the music flowed with a natural ease that some rival amps struggle to match.

By way of comparison with a few likely challengers, the clear and explicit Naim Nait XS2 didn't gel quite as well, sounding a little less natural, while the Rega Elicit-R made this recording feel slightly opaque and veiled.

Randy Crawford's 'You Might Need Somebody' from *Secret Combination* [Warner, 1981] is a beautiful soul recording, where she displays her amazing voice to great effect. It's a warm and inviting cut with plenty of air. The Exposure showcased those beautiful vocal chords, and conjured up a wonderfully relaxed yet stirring performance dripping with feel.

Rather than suffering any obvious weak points, this integrated amp is surprisingly strong in most areas. This makes it a truly satisfying listen, offering rather more than its modest price would suggest.

VERDICT

Exposure's 3010S2 has a special charm of its very own – big-hearted, powerful and expansive. Every type of music played through the Exposure gets a good airing as it not only communicates very well in hi-fi terms – soundstaging, depth perspective, detail, dynamics, etc – but blends all the elements together cohesively. ☺

'In "Humdrum" the rich, sonorous timbre of the pianoforte was lovely'

the knobs have a smooth and silky action. It has six inputs, and there's also the option of a moving-magnet or moving-coil phono module.

The manufacturer says that much attention has been paid to squeezing the best sound out of its circuitry. To this end, special capacitors feature in the signal path and the circuit topology has been mapped with a view to keeping

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	135W / 225W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	175W / 325W / 555W / 30W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.017–0.032ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	–0.16dB to –12.7dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/110W)	25mV / 265mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/110W)	80.4dB / 100.8dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.005–0.027%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	23W / 265W
Dimensions (WHD)	440x115x300mm

Back to black.



Notes are black. Vinyl is black. Anodised aluminum is blacker than black. The Confidence C4 Platinum is a no-compromise world-class loudspeaker in a new black design. The C4 captivates with unparalleled sound quality, from incredibly deep bass to clear, smooth, detailed highs, even in larger rooms. It features Dynaudio's innovative DDC technology, the legendary Esotar² tweeter and expertly built and elegantly finished cabinets, making it the finest sounding and most distinguished Confidence range yet. The new Confidence C4. It's black.

All there is. **DYNAUDIO**

**AUDIO
FILE**

Integrated hybrid amplifier. Rated at 300W/8ohm
Made by: Musical Fidelity Ltd, London
Supplied by: Musical Fidelity Ltd
Telephone: 0208 900 2866
Web: www.musicalfidelity.com
Price: £8000



Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 800

We ran the scoop review of MF's debut Nu-Vista unit over 15 years ago [*HFN* Aug '98]. Now the company has this new nuvistor-equipped integrated amp, having recently found a company to make the requisite tube bases.

Blessedly, it eschews gadgetry offering just a remote, a switchable display of input and level, home theatre pass-through for one of the four line inputs and extra speaker terminals for bi-wiring.

The Nu-Vista 800 has a fascia machined from solid aluminium and sides fitted with attractive heatsink extrusions – it even comes with spikes for the feet and with cups too, to protect floor finishes.

'Here was an integrated capable of providing a copious precise bass'

Besides its sets of multi-way binding posts, the rear copper panel houses phono sockets for line-level sources, a balanced XLR input, pre-out and line-out. That's it. Except for one bit of frivolity: the feet not only light up – the colours change from red to yellow to green to indicate the state of warm-up – they're down-lit, too.

For the '800, Musical Fidelity has moved the Nu-Vista concept along from its progenitors through the use of 'state of the art surface mount design PCB techniques'. This involved CAD/CAM PCB design and developing bespoke software for volume control and switching.

The Nu-Vista 800's preamp section is sited on the same PCB as the input switching circuitry to keep all signal tracks as short as possible. Overall configuration is dual mono, with separate mains transformers for each channel. The nuvistor stage itself is visible through the top plate of the '800.

LET THERE BE LIGHT

OK, so switch-on results in a dazzling display of colours, as if the Aurora Borealis had mated with a piece of hi-fi equipment. The '800 emphatically tells its owner that this is no ordinary unit. And it could drive Wilson Audio Alexias [*HFN* Mar '13] to levels that we'd never suffer for more than a few seconds!

The single track that made us sit back and go 'Whoa!' came from Hall and Oates, the punchy 'Africa' from *Voices* [Mobile Fidelity]. It opens with frenetic 'tribal' drumming reminiscent of Kodo.

ABOVE: Minimalism rules, with only massive rotaries for volume and source, and buttons below for power on/off and display settings. All functions are controllable by a solid metal remote

And within seconds of firing up the '800, we knew that here was an integrated amp capable of delivering copious amounts of controlled, extended, precise bass. The Nu-Vista 800 rocks...

When dealing with stereo, the recreation of space says as much about performance as does tonal accuracy. The '800 excelled to a point where we'd rank it alongside the very best we have ever heard.

With the remastered Four Seasons catalogue, *The Classic Albums* [Rhino], we have access to fantastic editions of superlative recordings that exist to show off one thing: peerless harmonies. 'Silence Is Golden' sounds smooth, detailed, but above all, cinematic in its spatial magnificence. The '800 is so open and transparent that you felt as if you could walk around each individual vocalist.

We played Foreigner's maudlin smash, 'Waiting For A Girl Like You' from *Foreigner 4* [Mobile Fidelity]. This track is awash with lush harmonies, synth-y swells, tasteful drumming, *ad nauseam*, but has, above all, a silky overall texture.

Fed with this, the '800 rises up like it was 1952 and it's time to unveil Cinerama. Its sound is huge, room-filling... grand rather than grandiose... persuasive rather than commanding. Using a wine analogy, this would be to most 'mega-amps' what Ornellaia is to Amarone.

VERDICT

Those lucky enough to savour early Nu-Vista models will know what's in store: the speed and punch of solid-state, with the 'love' you only get from valves. This is a stupendously powerful integrated with impeccable behaviour. ⤵

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	325W / 580W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	370W / 700W / 1.30kW / 2.17kW
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.03–0.08ohm
Freq. response (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	–0.15dB to –0.20dB / –4.0dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/300W)	22mV / 373mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/300W)	86.0dB / 110.8dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.001–0.004%
Power consumption (Idle/Max. o/p)	120W / 935W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	483x187x510mm / 45kg



Valve preamplifier
Made by: Audio Research Corp, Minnesota, USA
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.audioresearch.com; www.absolutesounds.com
Price: £8998

AUDIO
FILE



Audio Research SP20

If you're old enough to remember Audio Research gear circa-1972, the new SP20 will tug at your heartstrings. This preamp's fascia designer has revived the distinctive sectioned faceplates of the SP3 – the whiff of retro is much appreciated.

Suffice it to say, gone are the days of a half-dozen toggle switches, mechanical push-buttons or old-school rotaries. The SP20's buttons are limited to power on, mute and a choice of output to 'speakers' (power amp) or headphones, but not at once. The optically-coupled rotaries provide level and source, everything else is adjusted via the touchscreen. And a beautifully-made metal remote covers all bar the most rarely used subsidiary functions.

Comprehensive in more ways than even the feature-laden touchscreen menus imply, the SP20 is perfect for 2014, as it also

for an outboard unit, while at the back are the RIAA phono input plus earthing post, four single-ended line-level inputs, two balanced XLR inputs, separate monitor-in and record-out for recordists, and two pairs of balanced outputs. There is also an RS-232 port, IR-input, 12V trigger and a 15A IEC connector.

A tube-hybrid, the SP20 contains four valves within – a pair of 6H30s for phono stage duties and another for the line stage. After 4000 hours of use the 'Settings' icon glows red indicating the need for re-tubing.

The only disconcerting element, which would soon lapse with familiarity, is the odd feel of the speed-sensitive rotary controls relative to conventional types. You'll soon get the hang of holding the source rotary one way or the other, awaiting a click of the relays.

FAMILY LIKENESS

It was instantly apparent that the ARC SP20 bore much of the prowess of the REF 5SE (£2.5k more). You will know immediately that this is the successor to a long and distinguished line of ARC preamplifiers.

Its SP20 headphone output allowed us to hear even more in the 24-bit Beatles transfers from the USB-stick-inside-an-apple, these the most information-rich versions available, we think. That's not to say they're necessarily the best nor most lifelike, just the most detail-heavy and revealing of any system's retrieval capabilities.

ABOVE: Despite the minimalism and a touchscreen that accounts for the dearth of controls, this look references the past. The remaining controls are source and level while, at the rear, balanced XLR ins and outs are present, along with a complement of single-ended line sources and phono

The tonal colours in 'While My Guitar Gently Weeps' were rendered with such presence that any music shop habitué would not only identify the make of guitar but possibly the brands of strings and plectra as well.

Shimmering again occurred with the lush opening track of Nancy Wilson's *All In Love Is Fair* [SoulMusic], 'You're As Right As Rain'. Her voice is uncharacteristically fragile, backed by angelic singers, with enough strings to redefine 'saccharine'. The SP20 presented a perfectly seamless panorama that filled the room.

In spite of its CD origins, the most remarkable aspect was the sweet treble, slightly less cloying than through our REF 5SE, though the latter possesses a more powerful low end. Blessedly, however, the SP20 is as sibilance-free as its all-tube elder sister.

It is an incredible preamplifier. Turning to an epic like Wheatus's raucous, majestic 'Teenage Dirtbag' from the band's eponymous debut [Columbia], the wall of guitars that hits at 00m 40s demonstrates the physics of Phil Spector's 'Wall of Sound' despite not being mono, and not involving a phalanx of musicians. Through the SP20, it utterly rocks.

VERDICT

Having experienced over a dozen Audio Research preamps, our initial concern was addressed post-haste: the SP20 acts exactly as a modern ARC control unit should. It is detailed, open, musical, expressive and commanding. It suffers no lack of facilities. And we confess the headphone amp and touchscreen become seductive adjuncts. ☺

'The SP20 presented a seamless panorama that filled the room'

addresses the current twin revivals of headphones and the LP.

The former – addressed for the first time ever in an Audio Research preamp – is accessed via a ¼in socket on the front panel and offers plenty of power. The onboard phono stage is quiet enough, musical enough and fine-tuneable enough to preclude any hunger

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (<1% THD, 47kohm)	18Vrms (Balanced)
Maximum input level (<1% THD)	>10Vrms (Balanced)
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	1.1kohm–340ohm (Balanced)
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	+0.01dB to –6.3dB
Input sensitivity	202mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	96.7dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz re. 0dBV)	0.00048–0.0016%
Power consumption	68W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	480x134x420mm / 7.4kg

AUDIO
FILE

Two-chassis control/preamplifier
 Made by: Harman International Ind., Northridge, CA, USA
 Supplied by: Karma-AV
 Telephone: 01423 358846
 Web: www.marklevinson.com; www.karma-av.co.uk
 Price: £28,000



Mark Levinson No52

At last, Levinson's flagship No53 monoblock amplifiers [see *HFN* Jan '11] now have a Reference-status preamplifier with which they may be rightly partnered.

The No52 is a two-chassis component designed with meticulous attention to detail both in its topology and in features that offer comprehensive system configurability. The rationale of this approach is to isolate the pure analogue audio circuitry from any possible source of pollution: it physically separates the power supply and microprocessor-driven

driving the front panel, power management, RS232 and Ethernet ports. A custom-built toroidal transformer and regeneration circuitry provide 'clean' DC to control relays and audio circuits.

The user interface is simply wonderful – enhanced by a new hardware platform developed specifically to add Ethernet capabilities, firmware access, and configuration backup on a USB thumb drive.

The setup menu for the RIAA stage features multiple loading and gain options to confer compatibility with most high and low-output cartridges. It also provides a switchable 20Hz high-pass filter and allows correction for a cartridge's channel imbalance in very fine (0.1dB) increments.

Being a fully balanced design – including its phono gain stage – single-ended inputs are converted to balanced signals and processed as such throughout. There are three independent outputs available: two Main and one Auxiliary, each available on balanced (XLR) and single-ended (RCA) connectors.



BEWITCHING

How to describe the sonic character of a preamplifier designed to sound of nothing at all? What we *can* say

'The sound was brimming with saturated and vibrant tone colours'

controls from the audio electronics contained in the larger chassis.

Volume control is via a precision ladder resistor network with fine gain adjustment in 0.1dB steps. This sits in the No52's audio stage chassis and is shielded in a central chamber, while the rotary encoder that governs it is in the control box.

The controller chassis contains four universal-input power supplies, one for low-current standby, one each for the two audio channels, and an independent supply

is that the No52 transformed the overall performance of our system whatever amplifier we partnered it with, its transparency allowing forensic inspection of fine detail buried in recordings.

And with appropriate audiophile-quality recordings it helped serve up an expansive and enveloping soundstage that drew us in to a musical performance in a manner that was dangerously addictive.

Playing host to the No52 was of course a perfect reason to enjoy hearing those top-of-the-line Mark Levinson No53 Reference monoblocks again. But we don't remember them being quite as bewitching as we experienced on this occasion. The sound was more 'beautiful', brimming with deeply saturated and vibrant tone colours, and always inviting.

We revisited the 96kHz/24-bit recording of the jazz/rock combo Vantage Point on *Resolution* [AIX]. The No52 opened the musical window so that the texture and resonance of each instrument was portrayed with fabulous accuracy.

All the while the sound was luscious and relaxed, smooth and sweet but without being too creamy or mellow. It was also vivid and ultra-detailed without appearing antiseptically clean, and with instruments' transients sharply spotlighted, it was light of foot while still meaty and powerful.

VERDICT

Mark Levinson's development engineers have certainly designed a most glamorous preamp. Not only does it get out of the way of the music, its flexible configurability and pleasing user interface make it a delight to operate. Fabulous! ☺

ABOVE: Brushed aluminium black and silver faceplates are accented by red illumination behind the units' glass centre panels. Inputs can be named and configured via a setup menu. The two boxes are connected with three locking umbilicals

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (<1% THD, 47kohm)	>16Vrms (Balanced)
Maximum input level (<1% THD)	>10Vrms (Balanced)
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	10.1–10.3ohm (Balanced)
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	+0.02dB to –0.01dB
Input sensitivity	500mV (+6dB gain setting)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	102.5dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz re. 0dBV)	0.00007–0.0003%
Power consumption	31W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	438x219x330mm / 27.3kg

Bowers & Wilkins



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AUDIO FILE

Mono tube power amplifier. Rated at 115W/8ohm
Made by: Icon Audio, Leicestershire
Supplied by: Icon Audio
Telephone: 0116 2440593
Web: www.iconaudio.com
Price: £2900 (pair)

hi-fine
OUTSTANDING
PRODUCT

Icon Audio MB90 MkII m-150

Like the hardy perennials of audio horticulture, the standard valve amplifier circuits keep coming up fresh year after every year. And there's been a new flowering in the family of beam tetrode tubes that started with the venerable KT66. This is the new Tung-Sol KT150, and the first manufacturer to feature it is Icon Audio, showing this tube off to good advantage in its MB90 MkII m-150 monoblock power amp.

Built in Icon's factory in China but finished and tested in Leicester, the MB90 MkII m-150 looks solid and handsomely-proportioned. The tubes spring proudly from a chunky 6mm-thick copper-coloured plinth (in fact it's anodised aluminium).

On the right is the small 6SL7 double-triode for the first stage of amplification, while the 6SN7 on the left is the phase-splitter, creating the two 'halves' of the audio signal to be fed to the two KT150s in the push-pull output stage. In the middle, adding its own pale blue glow, is a 0D3 ionising voltage regulator. Underneath the chassis, as with all Icon products, the circuitry is built up by traditional point-to-point wiring.

The fascia has a Triode/Ultralinear switch and while running the valves

three-position toggle switch. On the back of the amp is a single unbalanced (phono) input socket and set of three speaker terminals, providing 4/8ohm matching options. There's also a choice of High or Low sensitivity.

'Low' is designed to work with normal valve and solid-state preamps and gives the best damping factor for difficult speaker loads.

'High' is more suitable for use with passive preamps or other source devices with a volume control. But, says Icon, 'purists may prefer this low feedback sound.'

VARYING THE SOUND

Comparing Triode and Ultralinear settings we found that the triode mode was often just more atmospheric-sounding, and ultralinear was generally just not quite so sweet. With Marta Gomez and *Entre Cada Palabra* [Chesky] the vocals appeared more focused, whereas with the ultralinear the singer appeared almost to be splashed across the stage. In triode mode, the bass seemed not so deep and at the same time perhaps less well-controlled, but somehow with a coherent connection to the upper registers that made it satisfying.

We preferred the 'low feedback sound' of the High sensitivity option. Set

to Low, there was still depth in the soundstage, but it lost some of the sense of freedom and perspective.

On the 'Maria Mulata' track, for example, you really got more of the quick slapping and cracking sounds of the various percussion instruments. Conversely, the Low position was fine on the voice and agreeably smoother on the bright, sharp solo flute sound.



ABOVE: Tung-Sol's new, egg-shaped KT150 tubes are said to give better heat dissipation, a superior vacuum and freedom from microphony. They can be run in ultralinear or triode modes. Rear 'High' or 'Low' sensitivity settings help make the amplifier suitable for use with different preamps

It seemed that the Icon pair could always give the music a lively bounce. With Kings Of Leon and *Come Around Sundown* [Sony] the Icons gave you the power of the drums and bass (even though the bass weight was moderate), and revelled in the over-the-top guitar sounds. With Patricia Barber's *The Cole Porter Mix* [Blue Note], voice, piano and guitar each had a glossy perfection of their own. On 'Snow', the timbral correctness and fine yet unexaggerated detail of the vocal made for a gripping experience.

VERDICT

With ample power for most systems and user-friendly operation, there's a great sound that's tremendously inviting, and smooth as silk. ☺

'Barber's voice, piano and guitar each had a glossy perfection of their own'

as triodes may be expected to produce the best sound quality, the claimed power output necessarily reduces from 115W to just 60W.

Suitably retro in design, the illuminated analogue meter is primarily an output power meter, marked with a scale of 0-100 – in practice, you'll hardly see it move. But it does make it easy to check the bias on the output tubes, via a

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	120W / 120W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	135W / 135W / 185W / 165W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.083–1.11ohm
Freq. response (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	+0.15dB to –1.1dB/–10.5dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/115W)	88mV / 952mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/115W)	95.6dB / 116.2dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.025–1.7%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	110W/250W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	200x220x500mm / 50kg

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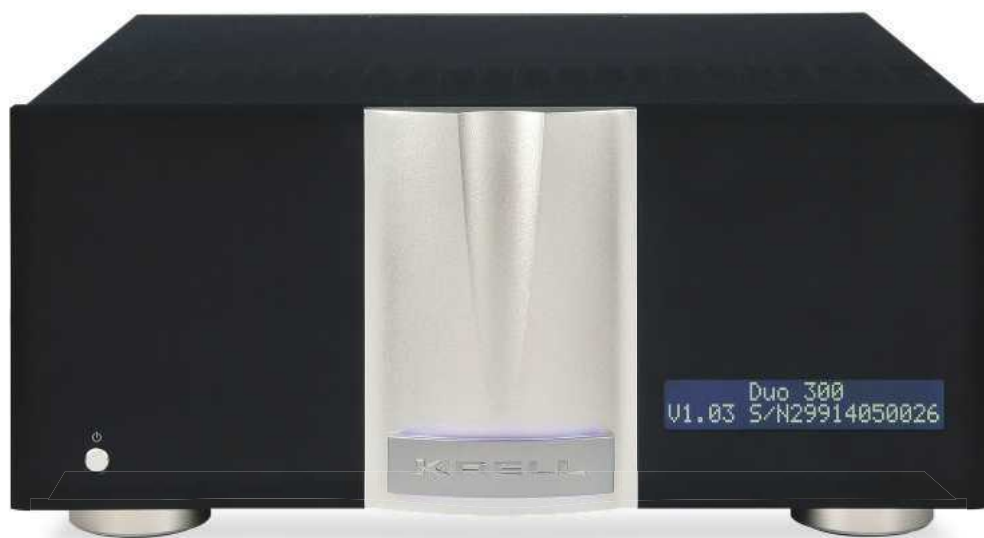
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AUDIO
FILE

Stereo power amplifier. Rated at 300W/8ohm
 Made by: Krell Industries LLC, Orange, CT, USA
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd, UK
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.krellonline.com; www.absolutesounds.com
 Price: £9500



Krell Duo 300

Krell's new iBias range is claimed to be more efficient, or less power-hungry, than pure Class A. Paul Miller suggests that iBias is a modern take on the popular sliding bias circuits of the 1980s. So what is the motivation for it?

Statements from the company suggest that Krell is doing its part to modernise the high-end, to increase its appeal to audiophiles who are not comfortable with bulky intrusions into their living spaces in a manner acceptable in the past. And yet nothing differentiates the Duo 300, physically, from hundreds of other ball-buster amps.

It's a big, metal-cased block, with the usual back panel fittings. Yes,

so each amplifier can be accessed on its own web page through any device that can run a browser, eg, an iPad.

The user can then view heatsink temperature, fan speed and other information. This will also provide alerts for conditions like overheating, fan failure and shorting of the output terminals.



BLISSFUL ATTACK

Finding something suitable to play through the Krell for the crucial, initial impression, we chose vinyl in the form of The Band's eponymous second LP on MoFi. In part, it's because of the astonishing bass and that incredible drum sound, but primarily because we love the album, period!

The Krell showed blissful attack with authentic decay, and just the right amount of dryness with the percussion that opens

'It picked up the snap of percussion with true "feel". This a Krell, alright'

the styling is tasteful – but there's only so much you can do with an amplifier's looks. This is a Krell by any name and any measure. Which is as it should be.

What does differentiate the Duo 300 and its siblings from the mainstream – though other companies are fitting web links, too – is the Ethernet connection,

'Up On Cripple Creek'. It picked up the snap of the percussion, the kick-drum air movement, with true 'feel'. Yeah, this is a Krell, alright.

But the Duo 300 could turn a bit harsh if driven hard – surprisingly picking up a rasp with Bob Dylan's *Blonde On Blonde* [Mobile Fidelity]. It reproduced in-the-room drum sound but noticeably sizzled on

ABOVE: Feed an Ethernet cable into the Duo 300 and any device with a web browser and you have access to heatsink temperature, fan speed and other data, as well as alerts. The Duo 300 offers a choice of balanced or single-ended inputs, has multi-way binding posts and a 12V trigger input

The Wonders' 2CD single 'That Thing You Do' [Play-Tone Records]. On the rockier numbers, there was just a trace of sibilance on various Badfinger tracks via *Timeless... The Musical Legacy* collection [Apple].

Salvation came from Lou Rawls' *At Last* [Blue Note], a bit of recording perfection. It was suitably silky, with only a tiny touch of brittleness affecting piano. Rawls' vocals were languorous perfection, while Dianne Reeves sang as clear as a wine glass from Zalto.

If we seem to lack just a little in enthusiasm here, it's only because the last Krell product we reviewed blew us away: the astonishing \$550i integrated [see *HFN* Jul '13].

The Duo 300 is certainly a good amp, but our exposure to assorted Constellation masterpieces and six months with a D'Agostino Momentum Stereo – all much more expensive than a Duo 300 – have altered expectations of modern solid-state amplification, regardless of the Class of operation, price, or any other respects.

Consider, though, that the Duo 300 is an easy product to live with in many ways, not least the cool running and easy set-up. Moreover, there is a bonus for those who harbour insecurities about massive high-end power amps, thanks to its on-line nanny.

VERDICT

Assuredly solid-state in its demeanour, Krell's Duo 300 doesn't, for a moment, suggest the (sonic) warmth of a true Class A amplifier likes its ancestors ... which may be music to the ears of those who can't abide 'valveness'. A touch more refinement wouldn't go amiss, but then: this one is for rockers. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	350W / 570W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	455W / 860W / 1.32kW / 725W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.017–0.025ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	+0.02dB to –2.65dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/300W)	139mV / 2420mV (Balanced in)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/300W)	87.8dB / 112.6dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.0023–0.014%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	140W/1.58kW (3W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	433x177x531mm / 32kg



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AUDIO
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Valve power amplifier. Rated at 200W/5ohm
 Made by: VTL Amplifiers Inc., California, USA
 Supplied by: Kog Audio, Coventry
 Telephone: 024 7722 0650
 Web: www.vtl.com; www.kogaudio.com
 Price: £11,500 (with 6550 tubes), £11,700 (with KT88s)



VTL S-200 Signature

User-friendly features are a major aspect of the current VTL Signature Series, including the power amp reviewed here. Based on four 6550 output tubes per channel, it has newly-designed output transformers, a larger power supply, and the Signature Series control electronics.

When running, the tubes can be seen discreetly glowing through the smoked glass front window. (Our sample was fitted with KT88s, an option that adds £200 to the price.)

As the 'Balanced Drive' wording on the glass proclaims, there is a

factor control, an innovation common to several Reference Series and Signature Series models that adjusts the level of negative feedback around the output and driver stages, altering the amplifier's output impedance and damping factor. Low offers 'the least loudspeaker control, and the most natural sound'. (Med and Hi positions increase the feedback in 2dB steps.)

When powered up, the internal logic system checks that everything is in order and, behind the glass front, a sequence of green LEDs indicate the amp is in standby.

To go from standby to operating mode, you touch the centre Power button. A Mode LED will indicate whether the amplifier was last set for tetrode or triode

operation; it also comes into play with VTL's fault sensing system.



TRIODE MODE WINS

By chance, the disc sitting in our player was *Remembering Big Bill Broonzy* [Beat Goes On Records], a 1951 mono collection. The amplifier was running in the normal tetrode mode, so we couldn't resist testing out the triode. And this was something else... Now there was an even freer and more natural quality

to the music, a real feeling that you were hearing a *performance*.

With Zoe Rahman's 2007 album *Live* [Manushi], recorded at the Dean Street Pizza Express, we again preferred the triode sound, which seemed to give a truer impression of the piano and the acoustic.

The DF switches at the Mid position were deemed appropriate for the B&W speakers in use, but setting the switch to Low produced one of those jaw-dropping moments, where a sound that we'd already thought was excellent became even better.

With Patricia Barber's 'Snow' from *The Cole Porter Mix* [Blue Note] we heard more depth, and a greater sense of three-dimensional presence from Barber herself when singing, while Neal Alger's beautiful guitar had a yet more luscious and mellow presence.

After that, on practically every recording tried, the VTL amplifier brought unexpected pleasures. It could bring out the best in a silky-smooth audiophile offering – like the Mozart Clarinet Concerto with Musical Fidelity boss Antony Michaelson as soloist, engineered by Tony Faulkner in the acoustically favourable Henry Wood Hall. Here the VTL was gorgeously light, airy, and spacious with a truly delightful string sound and a beautifully clean and open bass end.

VERDICT

This well thought-out design brings all the benefits of glowing 'bottles' with hardly any of the headaches. To say that the VTL gave fresh insights to everything played wouldn't convey what this amplifier does. Put simply, the S-200 offers endless musical enjoyment. ☺

ABOVE: With tubes seen glowing through smoked glass, the S-200 shares the control system of VTL's Signature Series monoblocks, and offers switchable triode/tetrode operation. VTL allows three speaker damping factors to be selected via switches

'It was gorgeously light and airy, with a truly delightful string sound'

fully-balanced differential input stage, feeding a phase-splitter which drives the push-pull output stage. In this dual-mono layout, the two small tubes at the front are 12AT7 (or ECC81) double-triodes for the input stages, and behind them is a pair of 12BH7 double-triodes for the left and right driver or phase-splitter stages.

Nestling between those driver tubes are the two small toggle switches for VTL's variable damping

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	155W / 240W
Dynamic power (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	175W / 270W / 195W / 125W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	2.08–1.98ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	–0.13dB to –1.35dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/150W)	60mV / 760mV (Balanced in)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/150W)	82.4dB / 104.2dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.075–0.93%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	310W/680W (3W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	470x230x457mm / 48kg



Hybrid pre/PSU and power amplifier. Rated at 150W/8ohm
 Made by: ModWright Instruments Inc., WA, USA
 Supplied by: BD-Audio Ltd, Malvern
 Telephone: 01684 560853
 Web: www.modwright.com; www.bd-audio.co.uk
 Prices: £7995 (pre with PSU)/£6795 (power)

AUDIO
FILE



LEFT: Seen under its outboard PSU, the preamp's clean, simple fascia layout follows on from the earlier SWL 9.0SE. On the power amplifier, the big illuminated logo is the on/off switch. The KWA 150 has massive toroidal mains transformers and generous heatsinking

Low bias setting switch, which trades off sound quality against efficiency. Short-circuit or current overload protection is provided by ModWright's proprietary Total Silent Protection circuitry, which lies completely outside the signal path.

FINE DETAIL AND BODY

When we put on Rebecca Pidgeon's *The Raven* [Chesky] the amplifier really did seem to bring a fresh charm to Pidgeon's heartfelt and optimistic love songs. And with pianist Zoe Rahman's album *Live* [Manushi] Rahman's energy was simply jaw-dropping on her version of Abdullah Ibrahim's 'The Stride', hitting new heights in her duet with brother Idris on clarinet. Gene Calderazzo's drums had power and speed and Oli Hayhurst's bass solos came over with gripping intensity.

ModWright's aim has never been to emulate the supposedly 'soft and cuddly' sound of valves but you certainly couldn't say this combination lacked warmth. It was entirely captivating on 'Intuité' [Favored Nations], where guitarist Pierre Bensusan often gets his instrument to sound more like an oud, with the help of added ambience in the studio sound.

The presentation here excelled in detail too, as the precisely-captured finger and string noises brought a tangible and inviting reality to the musical performance.

VERDICT

With this hybrid system, the sound bears the hallmark of long and thoughtful development by a dedicated designer, with careful component choice and attention to every detail, and it really lets the music into the room. ⬇

ModWright LS 36.5/KWA 150SE

ModWright's owner Dan Wright argues that 'Valves are great voltage amplifiers and solid-state devices are great current amplifiers.' Hence the combination

'The amplifier brought a fresh charm to Rebecca Pidgeon's love songs'

here: the top of the range 'DM' dual-mono version of the LS 36.5 preamp, with its separate PS 36.5 power supply, and the KWA 150 Signature Edition power amplifier.

The PS 36.5 has two rectifier tubes in addition to tube regulators which are installed before shipping, as are the two 6H30 double triodes in the LS 36.5. ModWright warns that changing the 6H30s for other tubes will damage the unit.

The front panel layout closely resembles the old SWL 9.0 [HFN Mar '07]. The central rotary control is a source selector with its leftmost position selecting the balanced input and far right selecting the home theatre bypass or HT/BP loop. Volume control and the source selector are motorised for remote operation. Between the two are three push buttons for

Mute, Phase (invert) and HT/BP.

At the back are balanced XLR inputs, plus four pairs of phonos, alongside one pair of XLR balanced outputs and the three pairs of phono outputs.

ModWright's KWA 150 power amp is a direct-coupled fully-differential design using no global feedback. The 'first watts' are said to operate in Class A, and unusually, there is a High/

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	185W / 315W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	200W / 390W / 730W / 1190W
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz, pre/power)	140ohm / 0.063-0.075ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-100kHz, pre/power)	+0.0 to +0.45dB / +0.0 to -2.9dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	1000mV (pre) / 124mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	94.5dB (pre) / 87.9dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.078-0.054%/0.028-0.053%
Power consump. (pre/idle/rated o/p)	88W / 155W/498W
Dimensions (WHD LS36.5/KW 150SE)	445x121x318/432x216x432mm

AUDIO
FILE

Pre & power amplifier with PSU. Rated at 2x300W/8ohm
 Made by: T+A elektroakustik GmbH & Co. KG, Germany
 Supplied by: Dynaudio UK
 Telephone: 01353 721089
 Web: www.taelektroakustik.de
 Prices (Pre/Power/PSU): £9500/£11,900/£7900



T+A P3000/A3000HV

Each of these three units – preamplifier, two-channel power amp and a power supply to ‘beef up’ the power amp’s performance – is housed in an all-aluminium chassis identical in size and appearance. Pre and power amp are ‘double mono’, the left and right channels both electrically and mechanically separated, with power supply

‘Low frequency power and definition plunged wa-ay down with ease’

sections, audio circuits and control electronics all in shielded chambers.

The new P3000HV preamplifier has a comprehensive functionality that includes an *analogue* tone processor module to provide bass/treble adjustment, a user-variable ‘loudness’ control to suit your loudspeakers’ sensitivity, and parametric equalisers for tuning your speakers’ bass performance to your listening room.

Illuminated touch-sensitive controls allow access to the preamp’s configuration menu, and a headphone amp is built in as well. At the rear there are six line inputs, inputs 1-4 being switchable between single-ended and balanced operation, while an optional (£900) MM/MC phono stage can be fitted by your dealer. The preamplifier microprocessor and display

circuitry, and its critical analogue audio circuits, are each driven by completely independent power supplies.

The partnering A3000HV amplifier features two deliciously retro-looking

power meters while a rear switch converts it to ‘high current mono’ mode. Voltage and current amplifier sections are on discrete PCBs while the output stage employs MOSFET drivers and ‘thermal tracking’ bi-polar output transistors.

The two sets of rhodium-plated speaker terminals can be turned on or off via the front panel and used for bi-wiring or for driving a second pair of loudspeakers.

ABOVE: On the preamp, two huge rotaries flank T+A’s familiar operational display, governing input and volume as well as navigating through the set-up menu. Meter display on the power amp [lower unit] is highly accurate

T+A’s supplementary power supply unit can also be added. It *does* transform performance.

LIQUID POWER

We began listening to the P3000/A3000HVs as a two-box combo, and were greeted by a subjectively ‘fast’ and vivid sound with tight, punchy and fearfully powerful bass. We were struck more by its effortless liquidity. With Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* [Telarc] the three-dimensional picture of Cleveland’s recording venue was palpable, woodwind and strings clearly separated, and the overall tonality frankly ‘beautiful’ – without appearing artificially sweetened.

Adding the PSU increased the sense of ease and effortlessness. It yields a major upgrade in sound quality. We had one heck of a fright from its explosive bass power while swimming in the ambience of the experimentally dissonant ‘New Moon At Deer Wallow’ from *Rain Tree Crow* [Virgin]. The pre/power/PSU combo’s seemingly unfettered low frequency power and definition plunged wa-ay down with ease, while the timbre and texture of Mick Karn’s bass clarinet was described in all its deliciously chocolatey detail. Bass synthesiser embellishments on Boz Scaggs’ ‘Thanks To You’ from *Dig* [Virgin] were likewise described immaculately by the HV combo.

VERDICT

T+A’s ‘no compromise’ HV series components are designed for the luxury audiophile market. In that context, this latest amp combo is sensational value. And as the preamp has tone controls, even the most unpalatable of recordings can be tweaked to sweeten them. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	350W (385W) / 620W (700W)
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	445W / 845W / 1.59kW / 890W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	45ohm / 0.051–0.061ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–100kHz, pre/power)	+0.0 to –0.45dB / +0.0 to –2.28dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	200mV (pre) / 133mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	101.9dB (pre) / 88.8dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.00007–0.00025% / 0.011–0.024%
Power consump. (pre/idle/rated o/p)	45W (An)/5W (Dig) / 160W/960W
Dimensions (WHD All units) / Weight	460x170x460mm / 28, 38, 38kg



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CHOICE

GamuT is a Danish creator of high end audio equipment such as speakers, amplifiers, CD-players, cables and connections.
www.gamutaudio.com

AUDIO FILE

Mains regenerator with four outlets (one filtered)
Made by: PS Audio, Boulder, Colorado
Supplied by: Signature Audio Systems
Telephone: 07738 007776
Web: www.psaudio.com; www.signaturesystems.co.uk
Price: £1950



PS Audio Power Plant 3

PS Audio's Power Plant P3 mains regenerator is the most modest in its range, offering three outlets in three zones providing 750VA capability, plus a further outlet in a fourth, high-current zone that is not regenerated but just filtered.

So if the 250VA capability of one of the regenerated zones isn't sufficient for your power amplifier, you can plug it in here and still obtain some potential benefit while having three regenerated outlets free to provide low distortion, low source impedance mains voltage to signal sources and a preamp. Note that, whereas PS Audio once extolled the virtues of a balanced mains supply, the P3 generates unbalanced mains voltage.

'John Gorka's "Italian Girls" suddenly sounded like a high-res recording'

There's an alphanumeric LED display and you do lose a little of the functionality that the larger models provide. But you can still enable/disable the different zones, vary the output voltage, switch between Sinewave and Multiwave output waveforms and degauss connected equipment using the Cleanwave function, all via the supplied infra-red remote. The P3 also features an internal web page

so that if it's connected to a local area network via the Ethernet port you can access advanced features such as naming of the P3 and labelling of outputs.

Given that the P3 is, in effect, a fan-cooled high-voltage power amplifier, there's an obvious concern over whether transformer noise or fan noise will intrude, particularly when listening at low levels. Well, the fans *are* loud at full chat. But so long as you don't work the P3 so hard as to need assisted cooling, its noise level is inconsequential.



ADDING SUBSTANCE

Reasoning that the regenerated outputs of the P3 will mostly be used to power source components and headphone amplifiers, we decided to use exclusively headphones for the listening assessment. The P3 was tasked with powering the Teac

HA-501 headphone amplifier [see page 79] and the Chord QuteHD DAC feeding it, each connected to a regenerated output of its own.

Searching for a description of what the P3 brings to the sound, the best we can come up with is that it adds flesh to the bones of what you hear via the wall socket. The sound filled out tonally and elements within it became more substantial and better organised.

ABOVE: Three of the four rear output sockets carry regenerated mains, the fourth provides higher current capability for larger power amplifiers but is only filtered. The P3 has internal heatsinks cooled by twin fans, so there are ventilation holes top and bottom

With some items of music we tried, like Free's 'I'll Be Creepin' [Island], there was a sense of the change not being exclusively positive: that is, some of the energy of the performance could seem diminished. But on other items the change was transformative.

On Todd Rundgren's *a cappella* 'For Lack Of Honest Work', for instance, it wasn't merely that Rundgren's solo voice became warmer and weightier but, more remarkably, that we grasped for the first time precisely what some of the voices in the chorus (all Rundgren's, multi-tracked) were singing. We were also made more aware of just how harmonies were constructed.

With the '501 connected to the wall socket and the QuteHD moved to and from the P3, the effect was if anything greater, albeit of similar character. On Nat King Cole's *Welcome To The Club* [88.2kHz/24-bit SACD rip] the sound gained in substance, became a little cleaner on trumpets and vocal sibilants, and conveyed a greater sense of ease and authority.

Plugging both the '501 and the QuteHD into the P3 had the hoped for synergistic effect. John Gorka's whimsical 'Italian Girls', ripped from an AIX DVD-A, suddenly sounded like a real hi-res recording, the vocal and the acoustic guitar both gaining in clarity, dynamics and sheer plausibility. And the macho stomp of 'I'll Be Creepin' was unreservedly superior to the version without the P3 in circuit.

VERDICT

If you've never tried mains regeneration, you should – and the P3 provides a relatively painless way to do so. It represents great value for a product that is capable of transforming sound quality, particularly of source components, as the P3 so clearly can. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Harmonic	Mains	P3
3rd	0.63%	0.17%
5th	2.37%	0.39%
7th	0.90%	0.25%
9th	0.38%	0.10%
THD (2nd-14th)	2.66%	0.51%



USB hub-powered DAC and headphone amplifier
 Made by: Light Harmonic LLC, California, USA
 Supplied by: Anthem AV Solutions, East Sussex
 Telephone: 01825 750 858
 Web: <http://geek.lhllabs.com>; www.anthemavs.co.uk
 Price: £299

AUDIO
FILE



Light Harmonic Geek Out EM

Light Harmonic's Geek Out USB DAC is the outcome of a Kickstarter fund-raising campaign. The company targeted \$28,000, reached that goal in under 11 hours and went on to attract ten times that amount.

But while the notion of a USB DAC from the makers of the hugely expensive Da Vinci is not without its fascination [see *HFN* Apr '13], the resultant product is a curate's egg,

'We were now hearing previously undetected and blindingly minute details'

however much we wish we could be totally positive about it.

Although the USB DAC/headphone amp is a new-ish genre, the majority adhere to the basic form created by the Audioquest DragonFly [*HFN* Mar '14]. The most minimalist among these devices require levels set by the source, but as in the Cambridge DacMagic XS, LH fits proper volume buttons to its Geek Out. Simultaneous use of these activates the ludicrously-

named 'Awesomifier' 3D spatial effect, which actually does a fine job of increasing the sense of out-of-the-head listening.

The Geek Out is fitted with a USB plug on one end and two 3.5mm sockets on the other (47ohm and 0.47ohm). It packs a helluva lot into its small shell and is a serious DAC by any measure, handling high-res material up to 384kHz/32-bit and decoding DSD64/128 media files.

The Class-A output, inspired by the Da Vinci, can run so hot that it is genuinely uncomfortable to the touch, but Geek Out says 'this is normal and will not hinder operation.'



REMARKABLE DETAIL
 Setup was a no-brainer with the Mac Air and iMac, but PCs require driver downloads. Within seconds, we were hearing music, but we found the Geek Out always played at maximum level upon initial switch-on or re-connection.

That aside, the Geek Out performed, not just well, but remarkably so. Indeed we were

hearing previously undetected and blindingly minute details in recordings so familiar that they're bordering on the rote.

Johnny Rivers' 'Rockin' Pneumonia And The Boogie Woogie Flu' [United Artists] ices the bass with juke-joint piano, fuzz tones, hand-claps, baritone backing vocalists – a kitchen-sink experience accented with cow-bell, high-hat cymbals... it's rock'n'roll in its most raucous mood.

The Geek Out delivered its majesty in a way that one would assume was the sole preserve of full-sized components of uncompromised complexity.

The clincher was Mike Nesmith's 'Rio' [Pacific Arts]: soft percussion, acoustic guitar, massed backing vocals – the sound was as caressing as the promise of the song's lyrics. The Latin rhythms and the liquid guitar work produced layers of complementary textures, creating a party atmosphere complete with tinkling glasses. The Geek Out held it all together with the grace of its Italian-named domestic sibling.

Power was never an issue. The EM drives the hungriest cans to levels that should be proscribed by the government. If it wasn't for the sheer heat coming off the device, you might even convince yourself that it hardly needed electricity!

VERDICT

The Geek Out nearly undermines its astonishing sound quality with behaviour and looks that flatter its rivals. Audioquest's DragonFly is the default selection, Cambridge's funky DacMagic XS is the bargain of the decade and Meridian's sexy Explorer will seduce connoisseurs. But the Geek Out really is astounding. ☺

ABOVE: Mac and Linux OS need no additional drivers to plug 'n play via USB. The LEDs show sample rate and use of the '3D Awesomifier' while cans and hi-fi systems are served via dual 3.5mm sockets

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (re. 0dBfs into 47kohm)	4.05V
Max. power output (re. 0dBfs into 25ohm)	605mW
Output Impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.85-1.02ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBfs)	94.3dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 10mW)	0.003-0.072%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0 to -2.1/-5.4dB/-8.1dB
Stereo separation (20Hz-20kHz)	88dB to 102dB
Digital jitter (unloaded/loaded at 25ohm)	100psec / 135psec
Dimensions (WHD)	30x10x54mm

AUDIO
FILE

Headphone preamp/USB DAC and outboard PSU
 Made by: Meridian Audio Ltd, Cambs
 Supplied by: Meridian Audio Ltd
 Telephone: 01480 445678
 Web: www.meridian-audio.com
 Prices: Prime, £1200; PSU, £800



Meridian Prime/ Prime PSU

Here's a stylish new Meridian product right in the mainstream: a headphone amp/USB DAC with optional outboard PSU. It wouldn't be a Meridian, though, without having some novel features.

The cases are interlocking aluminium extrusions, double-skinned to enhance screening, and

'It majors on producing a very clean, grain-free and well resolved sound'

having no visible fasteners holding it together – clever.

The PPS power supply is not dedicated to the PHA headphone amp but provides five 12V/500mA DC outputs on mini-DIN sockets, each incorporating dual-stage linear voltage regulation, for powering other Meridian products as well.

Asynchronous replay of audio files from computer at up to a 192kHz sampling rate is enabled by the PHA's USB input, and 2x

upsampling of 44.1 and 48kHz files is applied to allow the imposition of its minimum-phase apodising filter.

In addition to two unbalanced analogue inputs – one on phono sockets, the other via a mini-jack socket – the PHA also offers analogue output on phonos. No fewer than three headphone outlets are provided on the front panel.

Meridian also offers Analogue Spatial Processing (ASP) which adds frequency-dependent interchannel crosstalk to imitate the acoustic crosstalk found

when you are listening to speakers.



GRAIN-FREE SOUND

What the PHA majors on is producing a very clean, glare- and grain-free, well resolved sound, albeit not quite the most thrilling or toe-tapping available at the price. (We used the Sony MDR-MA900 and the Audeze LCD2 headphones.)

Rips were auditioned of 'Love Me Tender' [Elvis 24 Karat Hits – Analogue Productions] and Nat King

Cole's 'Welcome To The Club' [Audio Fidelity]. The PHA did OK with its standard supply but, pleasant as it was, it didn't have the resolving power to make these classic tracks really live and breathe. Substituting the PSS brought a distinct improvement: the stereo image widened, instruments and voices were better resolved, and the music took on a vitality previously lacking.

In ultimate terms, though, the PHA/PSS still fell one rung short of delivering the most addictive, engaging sound we've heard from a headphone amplifier. That said, Meridian's efforts to maximise the sound quality of the PHA have certainly borne fruit.

As for the ASP modes, their effect is relatively subtle. The soundstage narrows as you'd expect of added crosstalk, but the tonal balance is largely unaffected. Heeding Meridian's advice that coincident-mic recordings might sound better without ASP, we listened to three vocal tracks where simple, 'purist' mic techniques were employed. In all three instances we preferred ASP disabled. Mode I narrowed the image slightly, with occasional hints of a nasal coloration, although Mode II was arguably less intrusive.

Maybe these options do better reflect what you'd hear from loudspeakers in a room but isn't the distinctive soundstage presentation you get with headphones one of their principal attractions?

VERDICT

These Prime units makes many other headphone amplifiers appear like period pieces. They also sound good, particularly via the analogue inputs and with analogue outputs and ASP modes disabled. ⬇

ABOVE: Styling of the PHA headphone amp [top] and PPS PSU [bottom] reflects that of Meridian's G series. Along with ASP controls, three headphone sockets, ¼in and mini-jack (with different impedances), are provided on the fascia

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (re. 1% THD into 47kohm)	4.6V
Max. power output (re. 1% THD into 25ohm)	320mW
Output Impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.31-0.45ohm
Maximum gain	+3.7dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	89.0dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz/25ohm)	+0.01dB to -0.18dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 40mW)	0.00075-0.013%
Power consumption	3W
Dimensions (WHD, Prime & PSU)	160x50x150mm (each)



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AUDIO
FILE

Balanced headphone preamp/USB DAC
 Made by: Oppo Electronics Corp., China
 Supplied by: Oppo BD UK Ltd
 Telephone: 0845 060 9395
 Web: www.oppo-bluray.co.uk
 Price: £1099



Oppo HA-1

It was perhaps Benchmark that set a trend by equipping its compact, high-value DACs with a capable headphone amplifier. They became, in effect, an amalgam of DAC, headphone amplifier and simple preamp, and the HA-1 is from the same mould.

Much of its electronics derives from Oppo's BDP-95EU and BDP-105 universal disc players [*HFN* May '12 and Jan '13]. The HA-1 uses the same ESS 9018 Sabre DAC and the same output circuitry but the headphone amp and preamplifier stages are new. The former has a Class A output stage conservatively specified as delivering up to 0.5W into low-impedance headphones or 0.2W into high impedance models (via phono input to ¼in jack out), rising to 2W and 0.8W respectively

'The HA-1 did a fine job of conveying the infectious dance pulse'

for headphones equipped for balanced drive. Output impedance is low, so the frequency response designed into a headphone is just what you'll get via the HA-1 – even if its impedance varies widely.

Conventional headphone amps might once have only offered analogue inputs but modern units like the HA-1 also provide digital options. So, alongside its unbalanced analogue input on RCAs and balanced input on XLRs,

the HA-1 also provides for S/PDIF digital inputs via coaxial and optical Toslink, an AES/EBU digital input via XLR, and an asynchronous USB input via the usual B-type socket.

The unbalanced, balanced and Toslink digital inputs all support up to 192kHz/24-bit resolution while the USB input stretches out to 384kHz/32-bit. It also provides for DSD replay using the DoP interface at rates up to DSD128, and even supports DSD256 in 'native' mode.

The rear panel is completed by a pair of phono and XLR output sockets, trigger in and out sockets, and the usual IEC mains socket. Round the front a further USB input is provided for the connection of an iPod, iPhone or iPad, and the HA-1 also incorporates a Bluetooth wireless input via a little attachable stub aerial.

Front-panel controls provide power on/off and source selection to the left above the ¼in jack socket and XLR headphone output sockets, with a large volume control knob to the right.



CLEAR AND EXPLICIT
 So how does it sound? Via the back-panel USB input and listening over Sony's fine MDR-MA900 headphones [*HFN* Oct '12], we achieved very good results. The sound was smooth and neutral, but with a reserved quality that bade well for extended listening even if it didn't quite mine all the detail and vivacity to be had from a good recording.

ABOVE: Between the input source selector and volume knobs is a large display that can be variously configured. This Spectrum option shows a graphical analysis of the input signal

But the HA-1's headphone amplifier stage does have a clean, clear, explicit sound quality that provides insight and enjoyment on a wide range of music. We tried, for instance, the title track from Arne Domnérus's *Antiphone Blues* [Proprius] – a typical 'audiophile' recording where you listen more for the sound quality than the music.

The HA-1 lapped it all up, with a forthright saxophone sound but well developed sense of the church acoustic and its long reverberation time. It was a similar story with an 88.2kHz/24-bit download of Daft Punk's 'Giorgio By Moroder' from *Random Access Memories*. The HA-1 majored on explicitness but still did a fine job of conveying the infectious dance pulse that develops in the background.

Next we used the HA-1 as a DAC, first via its USB input to its preamp output (volume control disabled), using a Teac HA-501 as the headphone amp [see page 79]. We found the HA-1 to sound a little diffuse in this guise – the Daft Punk track, for instance, lost some of its urgency heard previously. Via S/PDIF the situation is complicated by the high jitter at lower sampling rates [see Lab Report *HFN* Sep '14]. We did our USB-S/PDIF comparisons using 88.2kHz files to sidestep this issue. And the result was, indeed, a preference for the S/PDIF input, which restored some missing colour.

VERDICT

The HA-1 is a well thought out and thoroughly engineered product at a competitive price. Its headphone amplifier stage is up there with the finest, and on high sampling rate material delivered via S/PDIF you hear it at its considerable best. ⏻

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (re. 1% THD into 47kohm)	17.5V
Max. power output (re. 1% THD into 25ohm)	8495mW
Output Impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	1.25-1.35ohm
Maximum gain	+6.65dB (High gain mode)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	93.0dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz/25ohm)	-0.03dB to -0.10dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 40mW)	0.040-0.045%
Power consumption	30W
Dimensions (WHD)	254x80x333mm



DC-coupled headphone preamp
Made by: Schiit Audio, Valencia, CA, USA
Supplied by: Electromod, UK
Telephone: 01494 956558
Web: www.schiit.com; www.electromod.co.uk
Price: £80

AUDIO
FILE



Schiit Audio Magni

Schiit products benefit from a Scandinavian nomenclature – Asgard, Bifrost, *et al* – so, should this stunning little Magni headphone amplifier prove tempting, you needn't approach the salesman with the embarrassing request, 'Do you stock Schiit?'

As its company founders are seasoned designers of [quote], 'fully balanced differential power amplifiers, fully discrete I/V conversion stages, audiophile D/A converters, relay-switched stepped attenuator volume controls in preamps, etc,' they could have launched Schiit with whatever product genre they liked. Being savvy, they chose headphone amps.

Schiit works with 'simple, discrete circuit topologies' for the analogue sections, while its DAC products feature 'innovative bit-

cost-cutting, and the rear-panel on/off toggle and the front panel rotary feel solid and encouraging.

This is budget esoterica at its most blissfully simple, inexpensive and compact. Schiit claims that the Magni delivers 1.2W/32ohm and it certainly drove the new Focal Spirit Classic, which barely made a peep with the feed from an iPod. Ironically, it suits the sort of headphones that one might not expect to be partnered with a £99 amp – we also gave it a whirl with a grand's worth of AKG K812s and it was a delight.

This baby runs warm, but it's suitably ventilated and never caused any worries. A regulated 16V wall wart AC power pack feeds the Magni, and rear line inputs are via phonos. At the front is the 1/4in socket, inviting you to

use 'real' cans, which are driven by a discrete gain stage design with 'fast VAS transistors and massive output power transistors'. Schiit uses a DC servo to eliminate

coupling capacitors from the output, operation being Class A/B and DC-coupled throughout.



DEFINITE GRANDEUR

A dose of powerpop opened the sessions, with The Wonders' CD single 'That Thing You Do' [Play-Tone Records] possessing all of the snap we were hoping to hear. The sound was acceptably wide, if not as airy as with the £69-dearer Musical Fidelity V90 HPA. What it

ABOVE: Front face of the all-steel Magni has a rotary gain control and 1/4in headphone socket, plus 'on' LED. The rear panel has just one pair of RCA phonos for the stereo input signal, on-off switch and 16V power socket. The unit is powered from an AC wall wart plug

lost in absolute refinement, it made up for with solid, extended bass, convincing decay on the kick-drum and good spacing of the vocalists.

Then we gravitated toward Badfinger's *Timeless...* *The Musical Legacy* [Apple], longing to hear the opening piano of 'Come And Get It'. Suitably church-like bass followed in cadence, sweet vocals above, cymbals far left – the mix of textures caused no loss of composure. Through the Magni, the track acquired a definite grandeur.

The Magni can also swing from out-of-the-ear stereo to in-the-head mono with convincing solidity and a wonderful retention of low-level details. George Formby's 'When I'm Cleaning Windows' [Retrospective] was recorded in 1936 yet it sounds refreshingly 'full frequency' and as rewarding as anything decades younger. Then again, the playing is peerless. Even better is his 'Chinese Laundry Blues' – suddenly there's rich bass and an increase in level. It's hard to fathom that this mono recording is even older.

But we followed it with the audiophile-grade live material on Little Feat's *Rad Gumbo: The Complete Warner Bros Years*, where the Magni was able to flex its muscles, spread its wings. It embraced the rhythmic fluidity, the funk, that made this band so genuinely inimitable.

VERDICT

We would not suggest that we have heard every headphone amp below £100, but we can't imagine this much glorious sound from anything that's less expensive. It joins a small, select group of components that let you wallow in decent sound for well under a ton. ☺

'The Wonders' "That All You Do" had all the snap we were hoping to hear'

perfect management systems'. It also uses Class A amplifier designs 'where practical – and single gain stages when possible'. It eschews op-amps, integrated or discrete, except as DC servos, or in the Modi which is the company's most affordable DAC.

Despite being built down to a price, the company's entry-level headphone amp, made in the US, is far from pedestrian. Its build quality, fit and finish do not suggest serious

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (re. 1% THD into 47kohm)	8.95V
Max. power output (re. 1% THD into 25ohm)	1996mW
Output Impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.86-1.03ohm
Maximum gain	+12.5dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	98.4dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz/25ohm)	+0.01dB to -0.18dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 40mW)	0.0016-0.020%
Power consumption	5W
Dimensions (WHD)	127x32x89mm

AUDIO
FILE

Dual-mono Class A headphone preamp
 Made by: Teac Corporation, Japan
 Supplied by: Onkyo Europe Electronics GmbH
 Telephone: +49 (0)8142 420 8141
 Web: www.teac-audio.eu
 Prices: £700



Teac HA-501

Teach's HA-501 is a Japanese product of the old school, with no-nonsense looks and a quality of fit and finish that belies its £700 asking price.

Teac highlights a number of aspects of the 501's circuit design. First that it operates in Class A, as evinced by the case running warm to the touch. Second, dual mono construction is clear when you remove the top plate to reveal two identical circuits side by side on the main PCB. There is a substantial toroidal mains transformer to energise them both which feeds (on a separate board) a shared regulated power supply and contributes to the unit's chunky all-up weight of 4.1kg.

Servo circuits control DC offset on the outputs and the output stage is claimed to deliver up to 1.4W of output power into a 32ohm load – equivalent to almost 7Vrms. The 501's USP, though, is its five-position damping factor

damping factor is high and 'calmer and softer' when it is low.

Other features of note on the front panel are an Aux input via mini-jack for connecting personal music players, and an automatic mute circuit that operates whenever the jack plug is removed from the single 1/4in output socket.

On the back panel two unbalanced line inputs are provided via phono sockets and a third balanced input via XLRs. The input selector knob on the front panel switches between them, with a fourth position for the Aux socket. To allow the 501 to operate as a simple preamp, unbalanced outputs are also provided. A three-position sliding switch allows the output to be fixed in level, varied by the volume control or disabled.



IT'S MARVELLOUS!

This is simply the best headphone amplifier we've heard to date for turning that rare trick of never

leaving you wanting for resolution – it's as bright and clear as lead crystal glass – while also never sounding relentless or grainy or strained. On the contrary, it delivers

a wonderfully fluid sound full of natural warmth. Mated with a worthy pair of headphones it serves up private stereo of rare musicality.

That said, the damping factor control is a gimmick. Sure, it makes a difference to the sound but we suggest you should leave it at High. We also marginally preferred the sound with the line-level output disabled, which was just a smidgen

better resolved (without anything connected to the output phonos).

By today's standards Elvis Presley's 'Love Me Tender' (an SACD rip converted to 88.2kHz/24-bit PCM using AudioGate) can't be anything but lo-res and yet its musical message hits home, and it demands really high quality replay gear to extract the best from it.

The HA-501 clarified but also schmoozed this track like no other headphone amplifier we've yet heard. That simple acoustic guitar accompaniment sounded utterly believable, the backing singers were minutely delineated while remaining thoroughly human, and Elvis appeared to be singing personally to the countless young women who'd swoon in response.

Fred Simon's 'Poetspeak', a naturally distanced NaimLabel recording of a jazz piano trio can sound a little soft, but with true hi-res replay equipment it soon emerges that the piano portrayal is natural and unexaggerated, the percussion sound of a quality you rarely hear in typical close-miked recordings and the double-bass a really good test of evenness of bass response. The HA-501 lapped it all up – the cymbals shimmered as they rarely do over headphones and the double-bass was even and adroit in a way that you will hardly ever hear from loudspeakers. It was bliss.

VERDICT

The HA-501 emerges from left field with no reputation or expectation attached and blows you away with its sheer rightness. Forget its retro looks and concentrate instead on its magical blend of resolution and uncontrived warmth. The HA-501 delivers a true high-end sound. ⏻

ABOVE: As well as controlling output level, the large volume control also operates the automatic mute. The quirky damping factor control is best left on its High setting. The HA-501 also comes in silver finish casework (the red flash is a removable sticker)

'Its resolution is as bright and clear as lead crystal glass, and never grainy'

selector located beside the volume control and accompanied by an illuminated 'High * Mid * Low' display, the asterisks demarking the intermediate settings.

What this does is vary the output resistance, supposedly to suit headphones of differing impedance as well as different listener tastes. The user manual says the sound is 'crisper and livelier' when the

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (re. 1% THD into 47kohm)	>10V
Max. power output (re. 1% THD into 25ohm)	2215mW
Output Impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	1.2ohm / 2.0ohm / 5.8ohm
Maximum gain	+8.5dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	92.8dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz/25ohm)	+0.01dB to -0.19dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 40mW)	0.0015-0.0018%
Power consumption	15W
Dimensions (WHD)	290x81x244mm

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www.music-room.com

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Parley Green Lane
Dorset BH23 6BB
Tel: +44 (0)1202 911886
www.jordanacoustics.co.uk



AUDIO
FILE

Planar magnetic (isodynamic) circumaural headphone
 Made by: Audeze LLC, California, USA
 Supplied by: Decent Audio, Stockton on Tees
 Telephone: 05602 054669
 Web: www.audeze.com; www.decentaudio.co.uk
 Price: £1725



Audeze LCD-3

This top model in Audeze's four-strong headphone range closely resembles the 'lowly' LCD-2 [HFN Mar '13] – both are open-back designs and both feature the Audeze planar magnetic drive unit.

But the costlier model has a thinner diaphragm, slightly lower impedance and a 'more efficient magnet structure'. Beyond that Audeze declines to elaborate, other than to confirm that the lowering of impedance was done to improve sensitivity a little. It couldn't be called notably *insensitive*, nor is it an awkward load to drive.

But there's no escaping the fact that the LCD-3 is a large and heavy headphone, even though the deep earpads, well-padded headband and modest head clamping force all help maximise comfort. So suggesting that the LCD-3 is suitable for use on the hoof would clearly be fatuous, and Audeze makes no such pretence: the capsules don't rotate flat or fold up into the headband and there's no provision for connection to mini-jack sockets.

Two flat Y-cables are supplied which attach to each capsule separately via 3-pin mini XLRs – the standard single-ended option is terminated in a metal-bodied ¼in jack while the *balanced* cable is terminated in a single 4-pin XLR.

A brief word regarding structural resonances. In common with many

'This was an object lesson in how good headphone bass can be'

of the headphones we've reviewed recently the LCD-3 has a headband resonance, clearly heard as a '*boing*' if you wear the headphones and tap the headband with a finger.

A headphone with the aspiration of the LCD-3 to be one of the world's very best merits being partnered with a headphone amplifier of the highest quality. We used the Teac HA-501 [see p79].

They might seem mismatched in that the headphone is getting on for three times the price of the amplifier, but in terms of what *really* matters – the ability to make reproduced music live and breathe – the HA-501 is an ideal partner.

GREAT FOR VOCALS

The burning question for any potential LCD-3 owner, of course, is whether it justifies its premium over the LCD-2. To which the answer is yes. Although, thanks primarily to that easy-going tonal balance with its relative lack of presence band content, the LCD-3 is never going to be top of the list for most explicit headphone available. Yet it does a better job of cutting to the heart of a performance and features of a recording than the LCD-2.

Elvis Presley's 'Love Me Tender' from *24 Karat Elvis*, for instance (ripped from the SACD and converted to 88.2kHz/24-bit), was that little bit more intimate via the LCD-3. Elvis's voice, and those of the backing singers, were more believable and the studio reverb a touch more apparent.

The LCD-3 has a well extended and controlled bass although at higher frequencies it remains reticent. This means it works best on relatively simple music, particularly vocals – but it helps if those vocals are close-miked and borderline fierce. A good example was 'Songbird', ripped from

Eva Cassidy's *Simply Eva*. It's a great voice but an overly manipulated recording to which the LCD-3 applied a welcome soothing balm, turning the sometimes strident into the mellifluous.

We turned to The Beatles' 'Come Together' from the *Love* CD. We've often played this track over modern headphones and switched off in disgust at flabby, excessive LF.



ABOVE: Planar magnetic drivers are like those in the lowlier LCD-2 but boast a thinner, lighter diaphragm and revised magnet assembly. Cables are unbalanced with a ¼in jack plug and balanced with a four-pin XLR

But not with the LCD-3: an object lesson in how good headphone bass can be when the response is flat to below audibility and distortion vanishingly small.

VERDICT

The LCD-3 answers to a particular taste in musical presentation rather than to audiophile imperatives in general. It will appeal most to those whose priority is smoothness of sound, less to those who place a premium on warts'n'all clarity. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL at 1kHz for 1Vrms input)	109.4dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	47.2ohm @ 6.8kHz 48.1ohm @ 3.8kHz
Capsule matching (40Hz-10kHz)	±4.9dB
LF extension (-6dB ref. 200Hz)	<20Hz
Distortion 100Hz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL)	<0.1% / <0.1%
Weight (inc cable and 0.25in connector)	645g



Open-back, circumaural planar magnetic headphone
 Made by: Oppo Electronics Corp., China
 Supplied by: Oppo BD UK Ltd
 Telephone: 0845 060 9395
 Web: www.oppo-bluray.co.uk
 Price: £1099

AUDIO
FILE

Oppo PM-1

Oppo's new open-back, circumaural PM-1 is no cautious toe-dip into the headphone market but a vigorous plunge into the deep end. It's a planar magnetic 'isodynamic' design that snatches the baton from Audeze and HiFiMan and dares to run even harder with it.

The PM-1 looks conventional, even understated, albeit classy, in a cool black and silver. Perhaps though, you will gawp at its weight – although at a specified 395g it is usefully lighter than the competing isodynamic Audeze LCD-2 [HFN Mar '13] and LCD-3 [p81].

Doing away with large capsules has obviously helped here, although arguably it has left the PM-1's earpads barely commodious enough for bigger ears. But Oppo has also gone to considerable pains to improve the efficiency of the planar magnetic drive unit with this design.

It claims 102dB SPL for 1mW, equivalent to 117dB for 1V into the stated nominal impedance of 32ohm. While our measurements came in slightly below this, Oppo's PM-1 is still comfortably the most sensitive planar magnetic headphone we've tested.

And this is also a set of headphones you can sensibly use on the hoof with portable music sources. Oppo supplies two leads – a 3m one terminated in a ¼in jack plug and a 1m one terminated

If you're a potential buyer, and you crave a character of sound that steps back from utmost elucidation and will (as a benefit) only sound coarse or bright with extreme provocation, the PM-1 could be *made* for you. Whereas if you seek insight and excitement even at the cost of a brighter and occasionally perhaps coarser delivery, the PM-1 may not quite light your fire.

Yet, as we've come to expect of isodynamic designs, the PM-1 does have great bass – clean, extended and powerful. On disco music like Daft Punk's immaculately recorded single 'Lose Yourself To Dance' [Columbia] we can't imagine anyone being anything but delighted with the PM-1's low frequency performance.

This same track, though, also provides an insight into the downside of the PM-1's polite tonal balance. We left Daft Punk for the sparse but captivating opening few minutes of Harrison Birtwistle's *Nenia: The Death Of Orpheus* [Lyrita]. If you don't know this piece with its part sung, part 'bro-ken-ly spo-ken' soprano writing, suffice to say that it relies for its impact on uncompromised vocal clarity and an almost

tangible sense of the Kingsway Hall recording space.

In the latter respect the PM-1s ratcheted back the sense of acoustic, and at the same time bled a little of the impact from Jane Manning's extraordinarily precise vocalisations. The result was certainly easy on the ear but less arresting in consequence. Where the refined character of the PM-1



ABOVE: Discreet styling rather than bling gives the PM-1 a classy look. It also delivers the highest sensitivity we've recorded for a planar magnetic design

did work at its best, I found, was on the luscious orchestration of 'By The River' from Delius's early *Florida Suite*. The main soaring theme was simply sumptuous!

VERDICT

We recommend the Oppo PM-1s as a fine piece of engineering at a competitive price. But you do need to assure yourself that you understand and enjoy what increasingly appears to be the generic sonic character of planar magnetic headphones before you buy a pair. ☺

'It's the most sensitive planar magnetic headphone we've tested'

in a mini-jack for use with iPods, smartphones, etc. Connection to each capsule is made securely via mini-jacks of adapted design.

SIMPLY SUMPTUOUS

For our listening, prior to launch of the HA-1 headphone amp [p77], we used Teac's HA-501 [p79], and the PM-1 presented a smooth, refined, if rose-tinted, view of musical events.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL at 1kHz for 1Vrms input)	114.4dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	29.2ohm @ 3.4kHz 32.3ohm @ 368Hz
Capsule matching (40Hz-10kHz)	±3.5dB
LF extension (-6dB ref. 200Hz)	15Hz
Distortion 100Hz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL)	<0.1% / <0.1%
Weight (inc cable and 0.25in connector)	520g

AUDIO
FILE

Open-back dynamic circumaural headphone
 Made by: Shure Inc
 Supplied by: Shure Distribution UK, Essex
 Telephone: 01992 703058
 Web: www.shure.co.uk
 Price: £467



Shure SRH1840

In recent months there have been two separate 'assaults' on headphone tonal neutrality, (although some might view these positively). The first is the increasing application of bass lift that research suggests will actually sound more natural to most listeners. The second development has been the renaissance of the isodynamic, aka planar magnetic, headphone drive unit.

Headphones thus equipped evince a suppressed treble output that endows them with a warm-toned, smooth sound that some listeners clearly relish but that others find lacking in 'sparkle'.

Shure's top-of-the-range, moving-coil, open-back SRH1840 embraces instead the 'old' ideal of a flat diffuse-field corrected frequency response – listen to some music and it soon becomes apparent that fat bass and/or a reticent presence band are *not* part of its offer.

One of the first things you notice when taking the SRH1840 from its hard-shell zip-up case is that it is light, at a little over 300g including cable with ¼in jack plug adapter fitted. Partly as a result of its modest weight, but also because of its low head clamping force, large and soft velour earpads (a spare pair is supplied) and padded headband, it is also comfortable to wear.

'The SRH1840 delivered quite enough clean deep bass to keep us happy'

Principal design features include 40mm diameter drive units with neodymium magnets, a steel frame and vented pole pieces; a fine stainless steel mesh immediately behind each driver which presumably provides acoustic resistance; 'aircraft-grade' aluminium capsule yokes; OFC cable with a Kevlar-reinforced sleeve for durability; and high density, slow recovery earpad foam to enhance listening comfort.

A spare lead is also included – the cables connect via colour-coded gold-plated plugs to sockets in the bottom of each capsule – providing reassurance that the SRH1840 should deliver long service.

NATURAL BALANCE

Shure's flagship falls towards the lower end of the sensitivity spectrum for modern high-quality headphones. But any worthy headphone amp should be capable of driving it to very high peak SPLs with ease.

There's no boom and tizz, and no undernourished presence band either – the tonal balance is convincingly natural, while the headphone delivered quite enough clean, deep bass to keep us happy.

A track that encapsulated the character of the SRH1840 was 'Fender Bender' from the Stockfisch CD *Roadhouses & Automobiles* [SFR]. A well balanced, tuneful, articulate bass register is essential here and the Shure delivers it very nicely. But it didn't quite serve up the crispness and treble sparkle that we were hoping for.

This impression of compromised resolution was even greater when we turned to classical material, eg, Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* with the LSO under Sargent [Decca]. In the good bits – the orchestral passages – the recording is one to make the uninitiated wonder at the sound quality that could be achieved all those decades ago, but the SRH1840 didn't provide the best advert for this: Peter's theme in the strings didn't evince the lushly vibrant sound that we know Decca captured.

By the time we tried the Oscar Peterson Trio's 'You Look Good to Me' [Verve] we pretty well knew



ABOVE: The SRH1840 is light in weight but claimed to be rugged enough for professional use. Stainless steel and aircraft-grade aluminium feature in the materials manifest

what to expect. The double-bass was kept strictly in proportion, but overtones were slightly suppressed in the bowed string sound, and bells and cymbals lacked some authority.

VERDICT

Shure's top-of-the-range headphone is light, comfortable, promises years of reliable service and comes as welcome relief from a recent review diet of bloated bass and/or denuded presence band. It would be an unblemished success story but for a slight shortfall in transparency. ☹

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL at 1kHz for 1Vrms input)	108.6dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	62.0ohm @ 20Hz 73.2ohm @ 20kHz
Capsule matching (40Hz-10kHz)	±4.2dB
LF extension (-6dB ref. 200Hz)	32Hz
Distortion 100Hz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL)	4.0% / <0.1%
Weight (inc cable and 0.25in connector)	318g



Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker
 Made by: Dynaudio International, Denmark
 Supplied by: Dynaudio International, UK
 Telephone: 01353 721089
 Web: www.dynaudio.com
 Price: £2850

AUDIO
FILE

Dynaudio Excite X38

This is the largest floorstander in Dynaudio's Excite range: a new series of entry-level speakers from the Danish company, all designed to be easy to drive. And the X38 not only looks considerably more sleek than the 380 floorstander we tested from Dynaudio's Focus series [HFN Jun '13] but it comes at only half the price.

The X38's twin long-throw woofers and midrange driver have supple rubber surrounds and one-piece cones formed for smooth dispersion. They are made of Dynaudio's magnesium silicate polymer [MSP] for light weight and high rigidity, while the drivers' chassis are die-cast aluminium, with neodymium magnets and large but lightweight voice coils.

The company sets great store in its use of aluminium wire here, instead of copper, which allows for

'Warm and inviting, the sound encouraged prolonged listening'

more windings and a larger coil diameter without increasing mass.

The woofers hand over to the midrange driver at 550Hz which in turn crosses over to the 27mm tweeter at 2kHz. This has a silk dome treated with a proprietary coating while the aluminium voice coil is suspended in magnetic oil (ferrofluid) to maximise power handling and improve the dome's excursion capability. A damping chamber is integrated into the rear of the assembly acting as an acoustic absorber, reducing back-wave energy.

You'll only find a single set of input terminals at the rear. To quote the company's philosophy: 'Dividing the frequency sections through bi-wiring or bi-amping is neither beneficial nor optional.'

The X38's integral base feet afford excellent stability whether on hard or carpeted floors and

the speaker can stand either on resonance-absorbing rubber feet or four easy-to-adjust spikes.

PACKING A PUNCH

With appropriate music recordings the Excite 38 packs a serious punch. Bass is tremendously tight and fast, with subjectively fine extension too, given the speaker's modest proportions. The midband has good presence, making the X38 an excellent monitor for analysing a recording's fine detail when you want to critically 'listen in', while the tweeter exhibits plenty of sparkle without fatiguing hardness.

The sound is tightly controlled while simultaneously warm and inviting, encouraging prolonged and entertaining listening. Chilling to the hypnotic soundscapes of Patrick O'Hearn's *So Flows The Current* 2001 album [Paras Recordings] we were greeted by a wide and deep sonic picture where the underpinning bass notes added satisfying gravitas to the ambient melodic patterns.

Similarly, with the chill-step electronica of Phaeleh's *Tides* [Aftergo], the X38's subjectively pungent and bouncy bass delivery added a gratifyingly solid foundation to the enchanting rhythmic melodies from this Bristol-based composer.

Albeit artificially created, the soundstage image was open and airy, individual sounds within the musical arrangements presented with precise and clear outlines. In dissecting each composition's elements the X38 proved rewarding and entertaining, and allowed the music to envelop the senses.

VERDICT

This is a great all-rounder for less than a king's ransom, and although not luxuriously appointed it is nicely finished. Clearly the cost-of-parts budget has been carefully managed by its designers to deliver plenty of 'sound per pound'. It's a fine compact speaker for the money. Ⓛ

RIGHT: A pair of 180mm woofers is married with a 110mm midrange driver and 27mm fabric dome tweeter in this three-way reflex floorstander. A large profiled port vents the enclosure at the rear where only a single set of terminals is provided. Different veneers are available in addition to white or black lacquer finishes



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	87.7dB/86.9dB/86.4dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.3ohm @ 123Hz 13.6ohm @ 76Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–50° @ 91Hz 24° @ 59Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±0.8dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	56Hz / 33.0kHz/31.7kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.6% / 0.4% / 0.2%
Dimensions (HWD)	1049x205x310mm

AUDIO
FILE

Floorstanding three-and-a-half way loudspeaker
 Made by: ELAC Electroacoustic GmbH, Germany
 Supplied by: Hi-Fi Network Ltd, UK
 Telephone: 01285 643088
 Web: www.elac.com/en; www.hifi-network.com
 Price: £5599



Elac FS 409

This tall floorstander takes its place as the top model in Elac's Line 400 series. All use the JET 5 tweeter, Elac's development of a concept patented by Dr Oskar Heil called the Air Motion Transformer (AMT).

In the Heil AMT, the moving element is a very light plastic membrane that carries a fine metal track to conduct the audio signal. Suspended between powerful magnets, this membrane moves when current flows. But what's special about the AMT is that the membrane is not flat, but folded into concertina-like pleats – it responds to the signal, opening and shutting like bellows, moving a greater volume of air than a flat ribbon with the same frontal area.

But although the JET AMT has long since become Elac's signature technology, the Line 400 range embodies several other

Our speakers came in Black, but the standard alternatives for all the Line 400 models are White, Metallic Tobacco and Walnut Veneer, with others to special order.

A GLOSSY PRESENCE

We obtained the best results with the speakers around 2ft from the back wall and toed-in slightly. With *Entre Cada Palabra* by Marta Gomez [Chesky], there was a nice sense of atmosphere particularly on the singer's most lyrical offerings, with a pleasant feeling of instruments spread across a stage.

Here, and on many other familiar recordings, we found that the Elac speakers brought a slightly different perspective. On the eternal *Jazz At The Pawnshop* [Proprius] there was a kind of glossy presence to the clarinet and equally to the vibes, seeming to bring these instruments forward. Yet the fine background detail was there when you listened for it.

The Elac speakers could be impressive on a clean and simple studio recording. With 'Perfect Fit...' from Gwyneth Herbert's *Clangers And Mash* [NaimEdge], the vocal was upfront and truly striking, although it possibly had a little less subtlety than we'd expected. The handclaps were infectiously rhythmic, while the big bass drum had real oomph.

Listening to the 1959 Heifetz recording of the Mendelssohn Concerto [JVC] there was a sense of height in the soundstage and an admirably airy quality. There was really no sense of hardness or glare, albeit a certain wispieness to the treble. Above all, the speakers brought a fine sense of depth and scale to the image.

VERDICT

There is plenty of detail to be heard but it's never too 'etched' or in your face. This carefully balanced design majors on spaciousness, with its wide-open imaging and a smooth, refined treble. ☺

RIGHT: Here the JET 5 tweeter is combined with Elac's latest 'crystal' AS-XR mid and bass units. Grilles attach magnetically with no visible fixings. The speaker comes in other standard finishes including White, and two wood veneers. At the rear, there is just one chunky pair of speaker terminals – with no provision for bi-wiring or bi-amping



'The vocal was striking while the big bass drum had real oomph'

innovations. In the FS 409, the next unit down from the JET 5 is a new 150mm midrange driver, specially developed for this model. This is matched to a pair of 180mm bass units featuring Elac's latest AS-XR cone design [for details, see our full review, *HFN* Sep '14], which Elac claims extends the unit's bandwidth by almost an octave compared with the previous type.

In this 'three-and-a-half-way' design, the midrange drive unit crosses over from the tweeter at 2.7kHz and handles frequencies down to 360Hz. Below this the two bass units share the work, the upper one rolling off at 140Hz.

Bass loading is by a large flared reflex port in the bottom of the cabinet, which stands on short pillars to provide slot-like final venting between cabinet and base. The base is supported by spiked feet attached to strong steel outrigger.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	89.3dB/88.2dB/87.5dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.4ohm @ 110Hz 13.3ohm @ 56Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–49° @ 70Hz 32° @ 20Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±1.8dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 150Hz/10kHz)	57Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.6% / 0.2% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1180x290x380mm

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AUDIO
FILE

Floorstanding three-way loudspeaker
 Made by: JBL Inc/Harman Luxury Audio Group, Northridge, CA
 Supplied by: Karma-AV, UK
 Telephone: 01423 358846
 Web: www.jblsynthesis.com; www.karma-av.co.uk
 Price: £70,000



JBL Project Everest DD67000

At the pinnacle of JBL's loudspeaker range, the Everest is a monster of a speaker weighing 142kg and priced at a whopping £35k each, its 250-litre enclosure 1110mm wide to accommodate two 15in drivers side by side. While it doesn't require an enormous listening space, a room does need to be adequately wide in order to space a pair apart satisfactorily.

The Everest has been JBL's flagship 'Project' speaker for nearly three decades. Carried over from the out-going model are the speaker's two horn-loaded beryllium compression drivers: the 100mm diameter 476Be high frequency unit and the 25mm 045Be-1 'UHF' supertweeter, working up to a claimed 60kHz.

The speaker's curved baffle provides the side-walls for the main high-frequency horn while top and bottom horn flares are accomplished by the attachment of precision moulded Sonoglass horn 'lips' to the enclosure's upper surface. The UHF driver is in a separate Sonoglass horn mounted to a diecast aluminium housing.

What makes the Everest significantly different, of course, is the inclusion of two rather than

frequency of 32Hz. You can cut or boost the output level of the low-range woofer and also tweak the 476Be HF unit by approximately ± 0.4 dB over the 1-8kHz range.

REALISM!

Play easy-on-the-ear recordings like 'No Sanctuary Here' from Chris Jones' *Roadhouses & Automobiles* [Stockfish Records] and you'll certainly consider the sound 'nice' – as you wallow in rich, deep and thickly-textured bass, a warm midrange and appealingly delicate, sparkling highs.

But there's nothing sweet or delicate about the manner in which the Everest recreates the blast of a trumpet, the wail of a soprano sax, or the sound of wooden sticks striking percussion. The timbre and transient attack of instruments is shockingly real.

We soon lost count of the number of occasions the Everest transfixed us by its sheer honesty. Hi-res audiophile recordings had us spellbound as the speaker divulged the true-to-life sounds of instruments and voices, and their acoustic settings.

As for rock-for-the-boys, Metallica's eponymous black album sounded cosmic at

96kHz/24-bit ripped from DVD-A [Elektra], as did innumerable prog-rock and jazz-rock masterpieces from the early 1970s.

The Everest doesn't require a brute of an amp to deliver deafening SPLs, but it is ruthlessly revealing of amplifier quality. It sounded sublime with Levinson's flagship No53 monoblocks [HFN Jan '11] which were supplied during the review period to show the Everest at its best.

If you want bone-crushing dynamics this speaker delivers in spades. If you're chasing



electrostatic panel-type soundstage depth and imaging, it provides that too. And if you've a penchant for enjoying rock/pop/dub/electronica at, ahem, realistic SPLs, the Everest supplies sufficient slam to be considered an offensive weapon.

Seriously: a pair of Everests will fill a community hall with hi-fi sound without breaking into a sweat, never mind an audiophile's listening room. If you want music to sound 'live', this is where you'll find it.

VERDICT

JBL's flagship Everests won't fail to blow you away. They allow forensic inspection of recordings and deliver revelatory detail, yet without any of that 'matter-of-fact-ness', often experienced from studio monitors. Simply awesome. ☺

ABOVE: The 250-litre enclosure has two 380mm drivers, one operating below 150Hz, the second crossing over to a horn-loaded driver augmented by a supertweeter. Concealed switches allow tweaking of HF/LF levels, handing the speaker and disabling the network for active drive

'The Everests could fill a community hall without breaking into a sweat'

one 15in woofer. And JBL's 15in woofers, have been substantially re-engineered [see HFN Aug '14 for full details].

To exploit these new bass drivers, the Everest's 45mm-thick hybrid baffle, made from layers of birch plywood and MDF, has been strengthened with a covering of carbon fibre cloth. The cabinet is ported at the rear with a tuning

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	93.2dB/93.6dB/93.8dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	4.5ohm @ 20kHz 24.5ohm @ 52Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–60° @ 62Hz 23° @ 43Hz
Pair matching (300Hz–20kHz)	± 1.9 dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	43Hz / >40kHz / >40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	<0.1% / 0.1% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1109x965x469mm



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HiFi World, July 2013

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AUDIO
FILE

Floorstanding three-way reflex-loaded loudspeaker
 Made by: GP Acoustics (UK) Ltd, Maidstone, Kent
 Supplied by: GP Acoustics (UK) Ltd
 Telephone: 01622 672 261
 Web: www.kef.com
 Prices: £10,500-£11,500



KEF Reference 5

KEF's statuesque Reference 5 embodies an overwhelming amount of research and development – it employs various techniques that are really quite new, but puts together many more that have emerged from earlier design work.

The 125mm/25mm driver developed for this new range is the 11th generation of KEF's Uni-Q designs, while the four 6.5in bass units are placed as close as possible to this midrange/treble unit to minimise lobing and interference dips at the crossover point.

But rather than having a conventional cone, the bass diaphragm is a shallow aluminium disc, which gives the driver a lower profile and ensures a minimal effect on the frequency response of the midrange and tweeter. Connecting the back of this diaphragm to the very large-diameter voice coil is a

Satin American Walnut and Gloss Rosewood, however there are also two special White and Black Kent Engineering and Foundry Edition finishes for the Reference 5.

DISAPPEARING ACT

Once set up, the Reference 5s have a pleasing and thoroughly harmonious look, while their slim frontal aspect ensures they don't unduly dominate the room. Similarly, they create a soundstage effortlessly disengaged from the boxes that are producing it.

On vocal tracks especially, the Reference 5s seemed to get of the way completely and let the singer's performance become as intimate and heartrending as you could wish.

With Katia Guerreiro and *Fado* [Milan], the distinctive ringing sounds of the Portuguese guitar also became something special, with a wonderfully springy, immediate quality.

And it doesn't take long to tune in to the difference between KEF's two alternative bass ports. In our listening room, with Adele's

'Rolling In The Deep' [21, XLCD], switching to the shorter ports made the big bass drum sound really come to life – truly gut-wrenching!

We couldn't help but be impressed by the combination of clarity and power at the bottom end, but it was ultimately the very pure and open sound in the midrange that kept us listening.

To give the KEFs something to bite on, we played Florence And The Machine's 'Dog Days Are Over' [Lungs, Island], and loved the way everything stayed intelligible right through to the climactic ending.

VERDICT

This impressive design lives up to its brief, and its carefully specified directivity and bass alignment should provide excellent results. With much to enjoy and little to criticise, this is clearly an outstanding product. ☺

RIGHT: This big and tall speaker has really been made as slim as possible, with its array of four 165mm aluminium-coned bass drive units flanking a new 125mm version of KEF's famous Uni-Q combined midrange and treble unit



'It was the very pure and open midrange sound that kept us listening'

vented coupler, an innovation first developed for KEF's iconic Blade.

As you'd expect, the Reference 5 speakers are massively constructed, and they come with heavy steel platforms with outrigger mountings for the spiked feet.

Internally, the cabinet is comprehensively braced. The actual drivers are braced by the internal structure but connected to it via a lossy damping material. Similarly, the front baffle is in aluminium laminated with resin, connected resiliently to the high-density wood cabinet using high-loss pads.

The Reference 5 is bass-reflex loaded by two rear ports, but KEF provides a choice between two bass tunings. Four heavy-duty chromed terminals provide for bi-wiring, with 'taps' in between to make or break the internal links that allow for single wiring. Standard finishes for the Reference series are Piano Black,

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	88.7dB/89.1dB/89.1dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.1ohm @ 33Hz 13.3ohm @ 2.4kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–31° @ 4.4kHz 37° @ 1.3kHz
Pair matching (400Hz–20kHz)	±1.5dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 150Hz/10kHz)	55Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.3% / 0.1% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1350x205x470mm

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noun

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AUDIO
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Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker
 Made by: Magico LLC, Hayward, CA, USA
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd, UK
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.magico.net; www.absolutesounds.com
 Price: £25,000-£29,000



Magico S3

The guiding philosophy of Magico's indefatigable CEO and designer Alon Wolf is along the lines of 'if you want it done properly...'

This extends not only to the largely bespoke drivers but in particular to those famously inert cabinets, employing copious quantities of alloy, innovative scaffold-like internal bracing and constrained-layer damping.

The Magico S3 is a three-way, sealed-box design combining the same advanced MB30 beryllium tweeter and 6in M380 midrange unit seen in the S5 [HFN Dec '12]. But it's the implementation of the M380 that Alon Wolf describes as 'the biggest deal of these loudspeakers' – the driver working into its own specially shaped sub-enclosure fashioned from a polycarbonate resin. This elongated bubble enclosure provides the ideal

'Like all the Magicos that we've heard, they vanish from the picture'

acoustic termination, reducing distortion over a 200Hz-2kHz bandwidth by around 5dB.

The chamber also isolates the midrange unit from changes in pressure caused by the pair of newly-developed 8in woofers. These employ a hybrid 'Nano-Tec'/aluminium cone material combined with a huge voice coil and underhung motor system.

All that noted, we consider the S3's extruded contoured aluminium cabinet – claimed to be the world's largest monocoque enclosure with ½in walls and having the potential to minimise diffraction effects, internal resonances and damping requirements – to represent the 'far bigger deal'.

The tall structure is stabilised by matching alloy outriggers fitted with exquisitely-machined adjustable spikes. Cable connection is via a single set of 4mm lock-tight

bananas per cabinet. Meanwhile, Magico's standard satin-style powder-coat finish comes in a set range of colours for a £25,000 ticket, but the glossy automotive paint M-Coat finish commands figures closer to £29,000.

JUST RELAX

The S3s took around two weeks to warm up and 'relax' before the music really flowed. Ah, but when it did, they sounded astonishingly quick, the bass utterly free of bloom or overhang, securing musical rhythms with the deadly authority of a nail gun.

The segue to Magico's topmost drivers is subjectively seamless, its mid deliciously detailed, the treble sweet but so obviously extended beyond the grasp of the ear.

The S3 is analytical by design but sympathetic, musically, in its approach. Thus it revealed the layering of The Beatles' 'Back In The USSR' [White Album] without tearing this vintage masterpiece to shreds. The drone of aircraft in the background remained

as clear as day, setting the scene for McCartney's slightly nasal vocals and enthusiastic percussion. The value of remastering this vintage recording was especially clear as the S3s rolled out the red carpet for the Fab Four, the boys performing with a clarity and energy that belied the tape's humble origins.

Moreover, the S3s create a capacious and very transparent soundfield without the conspicuous presence of an archetypal 'big box'. Like all Magicos we've heard, they vanish from the picture.

VERDICT

A 'tour de force' is not an uncommon cry in the promotion of high-end audio, but this promise is not only realised in the materials and manufacture of Magico's S3 but also in its exquisite delivery of the music. But you *will* need an amplifier of equivalent calibre. ☺

RIGHT: The star of the show is the S3's 6in M380 midrange unit with its own moulded sub-enclosure. The perforated grilles are magnetically attached but should be removed before listening – as here. Substantial, spiked outriggers ensure the tall S3 remains stable on all floor types



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	87.9dB/87.8dB/87.6dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	1.6ohm @ 20kHz 18.5ohm @ 37Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–54° @ 48Hz 38° @ 26Hz
Pair matching (300Hz–20kHz)	±0.7dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	43Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.2% / 0.1% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1225x303x305mm

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Floorstanding three-way loudspeaker
 Made by: The Professional Monitor Company Ltd, Luton
 Supplied by: PMC Ltd
 Telephone: 0870 4441044
 Web: www.pmc-speakers.com
 Price: £5750



PMC twenty.26

Although the bass and midrange drive units on the twenty.26 may appear similar to those of the PMC fact 12 [HFN Nov '13], they are completely new and only found on this loudspeaker so far. The tweeter is the one unit carried over from the existing models and it's the well proven Solonex 27mm soft-dome unit, developed by SEAS in conjunction with PMC.

Its output is rolled off below 3.8kHz to hand midrange duties over to the new dome mid driver – something of a work of art and a big step forward in technology for PMC. PMC has come up with a 50mm driver that utilises a very light yet rigid fabric dome, covered with a carefully configured grille that aids dispersion. The pole piece of the driver behind the dome is damped, in order to reduce internal

The plinths are 5mm thicker and 30% heavier than those of the twenty.24s to cope with the extra mass of these larger cabinets. Spikes are supplied, while the plinths also feature cork and rubber isolation mounts to decouple the cabinet from the floor, promising better stereo definition and tighter bass.

NEW GAINS IN INSIGHT

As the first bars of Steely Dan's 'Jack Of Speed' from their *Two Against Nature* CD [Giant] rang out, we had a feeling that we were going to like the twenty.26s – and this proved to be the case. The initial bass notes went deep, but the very subtly strummed electric guitar out at the extreme right-hand side of the soundstage was more vivid than we have heard it for a long time.

At one point, Donald Fagen emphasises the word 'routine' and the 't' can make some tweeters splutter. Here, though, it was certainly prominent, but merely a clean, fleeting artefact. A particular strength of the twenty.26 has

'Strummed guitar was more vivid than we have heard it for a long time'

reflections within the chamber and thus minimise distortion.

Below 380Hz, the dome hands over to a 180mm bass driver based around a lightweight natural fibre cone, coated with a layer of doping. This then feeds into a 3.3m transmission line.

A relatively complex crossover offers fourth order slopes between each unit. The circuit is laid out on a solid military-grade board with thick tracking and gold through-plating in order to allow maximum current flow. This is then directly connected to the tri-wire terminals.

Standing just over 1m tall, the twenty.26's cabinet is certainly no shrinking violet but it is handsome and the sloped-back aspect of the front baffle is very stylish, eg, the full-length grilles have invisible magnetic fixings. The review pair were finished in walnut real wood veneer but oak, amarone and gloss diamond black are also available.

to be that midrange dome – remarkable in the way in which it can dig out the finest of details on offer and serve them up in an easy manner. A perfect example of this was 'Hey Hey' from Eric Clapton's *Unplugged* [Reprise Records] with Eric's vocals projected expertly, and the string plucks as good as we know them.

We tried 'Takes You Back...' from Jazzanova's *In Between* [JCR], a track with some wild synthesiser bass that can rearrange shelf ornaments at the right volume level – and the PMCs had no trouble in doing so. And when we turned the volume right down, bass lines remained vivid and punchy.

VERDICT

A fitting flagship to the range. The two new drive units, created specifically for this model, do a first-class job, with the midrange dome a particular 'high point'. ⬇

RIGHT: Fitted neatly to the sloping baffle are two new drive units for bass and midrange that work with the well proven twenty series tweeter. The extra bottom grille covers the larger transmission line vent chamber



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	87.3dB/85.3dB/84.4dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.4ohm @ 116Hz 18.5ohm @ 45Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–64° @ 56Hz 31° @ 301Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±1.3dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 150Hz/10kHz)	41Hz / 36.4kHz/37.0kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.2% / 0.2% / 0.3%
Dimensions (HWD)	1062x190x439mm



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Two-way standmount loudspeaker
 Made by: Q Acoustics (Armour Home Electronics)
 Supplied by: Armour Home Electronics Ltd
 Telephone: 01279 501111
 Web: www.qacoustics.co.uk; www.armourhome.co.uk
 Price: £550 (with stands)



Q Acoustics Concept 20

Q Acoustics, established in 2006, is very much a new-wave brand that owes no philosophical allegiance to tradition, even if it is by definition a part of the entry-level British speaker scene.

With the Concept 20, two elements combine to achieve noteworthiness – the cabinet technology and the optional stands. It goes without saying that the price alone (£350 for the speakers, or £550 for the package) automatically qualifies this as of exceptional value.

The 655mm stands are handsome, well-made and clever – they lock to the speaker, hide the cables down the back, feature adjustable spikes, sound terrific and

'How can a speaker with dedicated stand at this price sound so good?'

could probably sell by the truck-load on their own.

But they are merely adjuncts to the speakers themselves. The bi-wirable Concept 20s, offered in lacquered gloss black or white, are two-way reflex designs with rear ports for which foam plugs are provided for fine-tuning. Under the grille you'll find a 125mm composite woofer and 25mm dome tweeter crossing over at 2.9kHz.

The cabinet is made of a construction called 'Gelcore', and Q Acoustics says 'The Concept 20 proves cabinet resonance need be a problem no longer'. This refers to a 'cabinet within a cabinet' design, the separate inner and outer enclosures 'bound together by an adhesive which never quite sets'.

Q Acoustics specifies a frequency response of 64Hz-22kHz, a nominal impedance of 6ohm (minimum 4ohm), with a sensitivity of 88dB.

Regardless, we were able to drive these to more than adequate levels with a current fave budget amp, the single-ended Coincident Dynamo 34SE which has one EL34 tube per channel in for a rating of 2x8W!

COPIOUS BASS

We kicked off with the stunning 'For What It's Worth' from Keb' Mo's *Peace... Back By Popular Demand* [Okeh/Epic]. It leads off with rich bass, solid percussion, slithery guitar work, a tight brass section and thick-as-molasses vocals.

Once we got over the fact that the wee Coincident punches like a 35-watter, we were drawn to the copious amounts of bass from this small enclosure. Considering that these followed listening sessions

with Sonus faber's Olympica IIIs [p99] and Wilson Audio Alexias, it was almost unfair. Yet they held their ground.

The piano-only 'The Times They Are A-Changin'' was positively chilling with Keb' Mo's voice centred, the piano just to the left, the space convincing, the airiness intact, the chiming nature of the instrument tinkling to beautiful decay. Seconds later, the funky, rhythmic take of 'Get Together', in all its quasi-reggae glory, provided a direct contrast.

Transient attack? Snappy, tight, no overhang with backing vocals seamless, harmonious. Coherence, from the lowest registers to the ear-friendly, sibilant-free top – how can a speaker and dedicated stand at this sort of price sound so good?

VERDICT

Here is an 'everyman' speaker: affordable, easy to drive, easier to listen to, and in possession of the wow factor. Don't expect the last word in finesse or subtlety, but that's just fine if string quartets ain't your thing. A genuine bargain. ☺



ABOVE: Looking perfectly of a whole on the matching stands (which hide your cables), this compact bi-wirable two-way offers style and finish not anticipated at the price

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	89.5dB/88.5dB/88.1dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.6ohm @ 260Hz 20.5ohm @ 113Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–49° @ 134Hz 46° @ 850Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±1.1dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	58Hz / 37.2kHz/36.3kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.2% / 0.2% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	260x240x386mm



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Three-way reflex-loaded floorstanding loudspeaker
 Made by: Revel, Harman Luxury Audio Group, USA
 Supplied by: Karma-AV
 Telephone: 01423 358846
 Web: www.revelspeakers.com; www.karma-av.co.uk
 Price: £4750



Revel Performa F208

This handsome pair of Revel F208 floorstanders sits at the top of the California company's recently introduced Performa 3 range. The R&D team has spent the past three years completely revamping its middle-range Performas. We're told they've been designed not simply to offer a step up in performance from Revel's cheaper speakers but also to give more than a taste of its far more expensive models. Manufacturing is in Indonesia.

Within its 71-litre enclosure the F208 employs the same 25mm aluminium dome tweeter and 130mm aluminium-coned midrange unit as the F206 [*HFN* April '14], its smaller sibling's two 165mm bass drivers replaced here by two larger 200mm woofers. Crossover points are at 270Hz and 2.2kHz while a terminal block at the rear sports controls for fine-tuning bass and

a new mathematical model in designing the waveguide which aims to widen dispersion at high frequencies and is claimed to match the tweeter's dispersion to that of the midrange driver around the crossover point.

In its walnut finish the F208 appears charmingly old-fashioned, though it is bound to dominate most average-sized listening rooms.



RICH AND VELVETY

The F208 really does sound like a big loudspeaker, with tremendous low frequency extension and bass weight. It has a rich and velvety tonality; the speaker's top end is lusciously smooth and 'relaxed' and notably free of undue sibilance on vocals. Shelby Lynne's close-miked voice in tracks from her album *Just A Little Lovin'* [Lost Highway], was finely-etched and sweet-toned.

Capable of serving up oodles of low-end grunt when the occasion demands, Revel's twin woofers also encourage a refreshing sense of dynamic effortlessness in the bass. Vigorously bowed

'Rimsky-Korsakov's "Dance of the Tumblers" sounded absolutely epic'

treble level. A five-position switch alters the tweeter's output by $\pm 0.5\text{dB}$ and 1dB, with a 'flat' setting in its centre position.

A low frequency compensation switch, which can be set to 'normal' or 'boundary', reduces bass output should the speaker be positioned less than half a metre or so from a boundary wall. LF contouring can be further tweaked with supplied foam bungs to plug the ports.

Revel's drivers for its Performa 3 range are all-new designs. The woofer and midrange units are founded on cast aluminium chassis, their motor units employing large diameter voice coils and proprietary copper ring caps. The drivers' diaphragms are formed of aluminium and ribbed with tangential dents designed to shift cone breakup well beyond the drivers' operational bands. For its 25mm tweeter Revel has employed

basses and climactic wallops of timpani were handled easily by the F208 as we enjoyed tracks from *Exotic Dances From The Opera* at 96kHz/24-bit [Reference Recordings], with the Minnesota Orchestra under Eiji Oue. Rimsky-Korsakov's rollicking 'Dance of the Tumblers' from *The Snow Maiden* sounded absolutely epic, while Tchaikovsky's 'Hopak' from *Mazeppa* was equally thrilling.

VERDICT

If you are looking for a floorstander that imbues music with keen energy while avoiding hyped aggression, the F208 should be right up your street. Revel's engineers have balanced it to sound creamy and easy-going, while maintaining fine transparency and plenty of detail at the top end – and its meaty bass delivery is mightily visceral when the music requires it. ☺

RIGHT: Also available in piano black finish, the F208's subtly curved enclosure houses two 200mm aluminium-coned woofers alongside the 130mm midrange and 25mm aluminium dome tweeter in a waveguide also employed in Revel's smaller Performa F206. Bi-wire/amp rear terminals are provided with gold-plated links



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	88.5dB/88.2dB/87.6dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.3ohm @ 2.9kHz 8.2ohm @ 20Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–37° @ 53Hz 21° @ 216Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	$\pm 1.1\text{dB}$
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	40Hz / 35.5kHz/33.3kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.3% / 0.1% / <0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1182x300x375mm

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 Price: £9400



Sonus faber Olympica III

Standing over a metre in height, the Olympica III is imposing without being a room-dominator. Our review example was in natural walnut, with joints in clear maple, while accenting this are leather inlays with highlighted stitching. As standard, the front baffle and back are also covered in natural hide.

The construction comprises 'progressive thickness' triple curvature cabinet walls, with solid walnut clamps reinforcing the structure. For treble duties, Sonus faber has fitted its now familiar 29mm 'Arrow Point' Damped Apex Dome, with neodymium magnet – its technology derived from the much dearer Aida [see *HFN* Apr '12].

Mids are handled by a 150mm midwoofer, designed by Sonus

neither is specifically 'left' or 'right' – depending on tastes, room size or other considerations, you might opt for these ports to fire either way.

ENTHRALLING

Our first test for the speaker was the gorgeous, silky, inviting 'My Baby Just Cares For Me,' from Nina Simone's debut, *Little Girl Blue* [Verse Music Group]. That signature song features her sublime piano playing and a lean-but-purposeful backing of drums and bass.

With the piano rolling under her smoky vocals, the percussion to the right and at the back, piano occupying the centre of the listening area, and the bass creating a perfect foundation, the results were enthralling. Impact? The percussion – both the more

energetic moments at the keyboard and the actual drum kicks – were rendered in a wholly lifelike and convincing manner. And you had the walls of the listening room disappearing

'You felt you had Nina Simone herself almost close enough to touch'

faber, with a special custom-made diaphragm that's treated with a transparent coat of a viscous surface damping.

Among the most impressive of the Olympica III's virtues is bass with a richness, a fullness and a sense of scale that warrants special mention. The lower octaves are delivered by a brace of Sonus faber W18XTR woofers, said to descend from the 9in units found in the Aida. Their construction includes sandwich cones using a rigid syntactic foam and treated cellulose pulp.

While these are instantly recognisable as Sonus fabers thanks to the oft-copied 'lyre' shape, the eagle-eyed will note the unusual side-firing 'Stealth Ultraflex' reflex port running the height of the speaker, trimmed with a perforated metal sheet. The speakers are supplied in mirror-image pairs, but

to be replaced with the sound of the venue, and with Ms Simone herself seemingly almost close enough to touch.

Matthew Sweet and Susannah Hoffs' *Under The Covers 3* [Floating World] comprises jangly guitars and chiming tones and two contrasting voices: the Olympica III demonstrated a prowess with detail retrieval that we associate most closely with Wilson Audio speakers, eg, the Alexias. Their respective character traits truly reflect the designers' personalities!

VERDICT

Sonus faber has produced its best speaker since the Stradivari. The sound is commanding yet capable of great delicacy, the soundstage huge, yet the imagery specific and precise. An achievement to rank with the Amati [*HFN* Sep '06]. ☺

RIGHT:

Gorgeous wood, with metal and leather accents embracing the company's signature 'lyre' cross-section. The Olympica III is ported down its length, with a quartet of multi-way binding posts at the bottom to allow for bi-wiring if so desired



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	89.0dB/88.8dB/88.5dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	2.6ohm @ 103Hz 22.5ohm @ 2.3kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–37° @ 2.9kHz 46° @ 1.5kHz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±0.8dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	67Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.6% / 1.8% / 0.5%
Dimensions (HWD)	1114x403x508mm

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 Supplied by: Dynaudio UK
 Telephone: 01353 721089
 Web: www.taelektroakustik.de
 Price: £40,000



T+A Solitaire CWT 2000 SE

We'd been hankering to audition this T+A flagship speaker for some time. Would the CWT 2000 SE deliver audio ecstasy to those who demand the wallop of a dynamic speaker yet also quench the thirst of 'purist' audiophiles who crave the transparency of an electrostatic panel?

There are three line-array 'Cylinder Wave Transducers' in T+A's Solitaire range. The big daddy, the CWT 2000, has a 920x50mm tweeter panel – the speaker pairs are handed – six front array 150mm midrange drivers, and on each side are two whopping 250mm bass drivers. Within the imposing tower these drivers occupy asymmetric individually sealed chambers, the

are formed of air-dried wood fibres mixed with graphite particles and embossed to increase stiffness, with aluminium phase plugs and long-throw rubber surrounds.

REVELATORY DETAIL

Although they can sound 'dry', at times almost matter-of-fact, the CWT 2000 SEs simultaneously sound creamy and luscious (which might seem contradictory). And we've not come across a speaker that is so exquisitely detailed while also so forgiving of poor material. If there is one thing to fault, it concerns a slightly opaque spatial imaging – it delivers a 'wall' of sound rather than a tight-focused picture.

Even so, this big Solitaire served up revelatory detail time after time.

But rather than throwing an artificial spotlight it simply helped to complete musical 'pictures'. The evocative title track from Robin Trower's *Bridge Of Sighs*

[Mo-Fi] sounded epic, the howling wind effects and idle chatter buried behind the weeping guitar solo all melded beautifully into the piece.

High-res recordings sounded fabulous. We were transfixed when listening to Marianne Kielland performing 'Come Away, Death' from Finzi's *Let Us Garlands Bring* [2L]. The piano accompaniment sounded firm and with glorious tonality, while her voice floated out with a compelling presence.

VERDICT

The CWT 2000 SE sounds dynamically spirited and full of nuance in a gently striking way. Its clarity and dynamism extends from the deepest bass notes through to the extreme high treble, with the T+A speaker able to track the ebb and flow of music to provide excitement of the kind experienced at live events. ☺

RIGHT: T+A's 50mm-wide electrostatic tweeter panel, 92cm long in its flagship Solitaire, is made entirely in-house. Here it flanks six 150mm midrange drivers in a line array while woofers fire outward from its side walls. The speakers are handed, and the bi-wiring/amping terminal rear panel has a trio of rocker switches for gently cutting or boosting bass, mid and treble responses



'It's a speaker that's exquisitely detailed yet forgiving of poor material'

Solitaires' baffles slightly raked backwards in order to afford a degree of time alignment.

The high-gloss lacquered cabinets are finished in a choice of light cherry, dark walnut, Macassar ebony, or all-black or white. Custom finishes are also available.

The Special Edition here adds further mass with a supplementary vibration-absorbing plinth machined from 10mm-thick aluminium and which stands on stainless-steel spikes with rubber dampers. Also, the woofers' covers are machined from 8mm-thick aluminium plates. Concentrically arranged apertures allow transmission of low frequencies 'without hindrance or resonance', says T+A, while their considerable mass helps stiffen and damp the cabinet's side panels.

All the drivers are made in-house – even the electrostatic tweeter – while the midrange and bass cones

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	88.9dB/88.6dB/87.9dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	1.1ohm @ 20kHz 12.3ohm @ 875Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–54° @ 11.7kHz 45° @ 239Hz
Pair matching (400Hz–20kHz)	±5.0dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	40Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.5% / 0.2% / <0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1610x350x500mm

変容

Transfiguration



Official UK Importer:
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Tel: 0560 2054669



I've been making phonostages since the late 1980s with the first commercial design to bear the Rothwell name debuted in 1990. It was a valve unit with a large outboard power supply and adjustable loading. Back then, even the concept of the outboard phonostage was so new that most people thought I was crazy - and even the use of valves for hi-fi was still considered extremely left-field. Since then, of course, the audiophile mainstream has caught up and outboard phonostages have become commonplace.

The intervening years have seen interest in vinyl dwindle to a few die-hards, followed by an unexpected resurgence that seems to be getting stronger and stronger. Youngsters who weren't even born when the first CDs appeared are discovering the joys of turntables and seasoned audiophiles who ditched their turntables and vinyl collections are returning to the fold. Maybe the guy who started making phonostages 25 years ago wasn't so crazy after all.



And I've been advocating the use of moving coil step-up transformers for low output moving coil cartridges for 25 years, too. In my opinion they still offer unsurpassed performance. Maybe the audiophile mainstream will finally catch up with that one, too.

And now I've applied that knowledge and experience to a range of phonostages and transformers which put sound quality first without costing the earth. The "outstanding product" and "group test winner" awards suggest that I maybe I've got something right. Again.

Enjoy your music.
Andrew Rothwell

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 Web: www.wharfedale.co.uk
 Price: £1650



Wharfedale Jade 5

Wharfedale describes the Jade range as its 'new audiophile class speaker designs', using computer-aided modelling and new material technologies. In the visually striking Jade 5, the tweeter and midrange are embraced in a combination housing that's common to all the Jade models, raising the axis of the tweeter's 25mm aluminium dome to peep above the front edge of the curved, sloping cabinet top.

While the midrange has a 75mm concave aluminium/pulp diaphragm, the twin 165mm bass units use a new cone material called Acufibre, said to 'marry the responsiveness of glass and carbon fibre' in a self-damping woven matrix. They

'The vocal was sweet while the flute seemed to have real air around it'

are impressed with a moulded pattern to break up standing waves.

The Jade cabinets are made from laminations of wood and a composite called Crystallam. These layers reduce the 'Q' of panel resonance peaks and also spread resonances over a wider frequency range. The bass loading is described as Aperiodic, and has a resistive acoustic filter rather than a simple reflex port. Wharfedale specifies the Jade 5's sensitivity as 87dB with a 6ohm nominal impedance.

Ports in the bottom of the cabinet are tuned by the slot formed by the small gap between cabinet and plinth, this being filled with resistive foam to control the airflow from the ports. Bi-wiring terminals are provided, and the plinth comes with ready-fitted spikes along with optional seats for use on wood floors. Veneer finish options are the Black Oak seen here,

Vintage Cherry and Rosewood, and they are also available in Piano Black or Burgundy Burr lacquer.

NATURALLY INVITING
 Natural timbres and an inviting soundstage were in evidence here. With the Wharfedale Jade 5, you felt that acoustic instruments could bloom unforced in a presentation that was always relaxed and almost never strident.

With Marta Gomez and *Entre Cada Palabra* [Chesky] there was good depth in the acoustic, and the bass seemed natural and articulate. The vocal was sweet and plaintive, while the flute seemed to take flight with real air around it.

On Jennifer Warnes' *Famous Blue Raincoat* [Classic] the sound in 'First We Take Manhattan' was smooth, glossy and detailed, yet strangely we felt here that the bass was less admirable, even tending to sound one-notey.

In Eric Bibb's 'Spirit I Am', from *Get On Board* [Telarc] the Jade 5 let you really hear into the mix, all the incidental voices and instruments clearly placed. Bob Dylan's 'Tangled Up In Blue' [Blood On The Tracks - Columbia] had the same kind of clarity, with the vocal full of character, energy and life.

The speaker also seemed to reveal fresh nuances in the vocal in 'Dog Days' from Florence And The Machine's *Lungs* [Island], and here once more there was an inviting clarity. The big drum was reasonably convincing, too.

VERDICT

The Jade 5's relatively weighty bottom end mostly provides a good foundation, if at times not a convincingly accurate one. Its great strength is an inviting, effortless midrange and treble quality that tempts you to carry on listening. ☺

RIGHT: Just over 1m tall, the Jade 5 floorstander sits on a spiked plinth and offers the option of bi-wiring. The tweeter and midrange unit are in a housing that is proud of the curved, sloping top. Five cabinet finishes are available



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms - Mean/IEC/Music)	86.3dB/85.8dB/86.0dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	2.7ohm @ 91Hz 12.5ohm @ 42Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	-57° @ 56Hz 39° @ 1.7kHz
Pair matching (200Hz-20kHz)	±1.2dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	57Hz / >40kHz / >40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL at 1m)	0.6% / 0.3% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1055x246x400mm



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Ken Kessler, Hi-fi News July 2012
TL5.5II / ST-150 review



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Two-way standmount loudspeaker
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 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.wilsonaudio.com; www.absolutesounds.com
 Price: £17,000 (£19,000 with stands)



Wilson Audio Duette Series 2

The Duette 2 is a thorough revamp of the 2006 original, with its aesthetics enhanced by design cues that first appeared in the larger Wilson models – the optional stand, too, is a visual treat.

Like the original, the Duette 2 uses the separate Novel crossover, its outboard status increasing the internal volume of the speaker so it still has ample space for an 8in woofer. Mounted inside the newly-designed stand, the crossover is mechanically isolated in its own dedicated enclosure.

Upgrading the tweeter has involved the inclusion of a rear wave chamber, which is said to attenuate spurious energy 'generated at the rear of the driver

'Lead guitar soars almost exactly as it does through the Alexias...'

that would otherwise leak out of the acoustically translucent dome'. One benefit from this is said to be a lower noise floor.

The restyled enclosure is made entirely from Wilson's proprietary X-material, an extremely well damped and ultra-rigid composite, with added bracing. The sloped front baffle is made from S-material, and tilts back at 10° to align the tweeter and the woofer in the time domain. The Duette 2 is configured solely for near-boundary placement, whether on its stand or on a shelf. (There is a separate Novel crossover enclosure for *shelf* placement, as well as 'furniture-friendly' spikes that then bolt to the Duette.)



A GIANT KILLER

The Duette has been transformed from a coherent, detailed compact, into a giant killer. Everything about the sound is grander, bolder, more

convincingly real. But equally, it is disconcerting. You look at a speaker with the dimensions of a '70s two-way from Rogers or Spondor, and you hear the mass and scale of something in which Clark Kent could endure a wardrobe change.

With recordings like the Strypes' retro BritRock on their impressive debut, *Snapshot* [Virgin], the 'wall of sound' is floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall, with an energy level that suggests a sweaty blues bar, circa 1966. 'I Can Tell' – with guitar playing that's surely a homage to Wilko Johnson – is deceptively raw, and yet there's real width to the event, the opening just lean enough to offer a hint of air.

The lead guitar soars almost exactly as it does through the Alexias, while the bottom end is as rich and controlled, if not as massive or as extended. Indeed, many might find it preferable to a surfeit of bottom octave activity as delivered by some larger speakers.

Track after track delivered a little miracle. We felt the urge for some majestic pop, with a *huge* drum sound. The Wonders' CD single 'That Thing You Do' [Play-Tone Records] opens with a fat, bulbous, airy drum attack – you'd swear you could hear the skins stretching. The intro leads straight into Beatles-esque harmonies and jangly guitars, this track from Tom Hanks' tribute to the wannabe bands oozing punch and sparkle. The attack from the Duette 2s was crisp and the vocals coalesced with Hollies-like purity.

VERDICT

Daryl Wilson and his team seem to have defied the laws of acoustics. For this is, without question, the best all-round, most truly satisfying small speaker of high-end intent we have ever heard. Size, it seems, no longer matters. ☺



ABOVE: The rear-ported Duette 2 retains the 'cathedral' look of its predecessor, while wild new colours are offered as standard. The Novel crossover is built into the stand

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	92.4dB/91.8dB/91.8dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	4.2ohm @ 179Hz 50.6ohm @ 21Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–59° @ 26Hz 42° @ 61Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±0.8dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	43Hz / 34.2kHz/37.3kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.3% / 0.3% / 0.3%
Dimensions (HWD)	470x267x408mm

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Supplied by: Audioquest UK
Telephone: 01249 848 873
Web: www.audioquest.com
Prices: £149/1m; £213/3m



Audioquest Sydney / Type 4

Inspired by the Sydney Harbour Bridge, but thankfully more flexible, Audioquest's Sydney interconnect is a symmetrical design with two solid-core PSC+ (Perfect Surface Copper) conductors for signal and return. The latter are thicker than the former, for a lower impedance chassis grounding (although the 190mohm loop resistance is still moderate), but all four are contained within loose-fitting polyethylene tubes, ensuring they have a largely 'air dielectric'.

These tubes are covered by a peripheral foil/carbon/foil screen, terminated at the destination-end of the directional interconnect. Silver-plated RCA phonos and a

4mm banana plugs. Capacitance is moderate at 162pF/m but inductance is low and resistance about average at 23mohm/m.



VIBRANT CLARITY

With the opening of Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*, recorded by the Minnesota Orchestra under Eiji Oue [Reference Recordings], the sound of this cable combo appeared notably open and clear, the orchestra depicted in a holographic soundstage with fabulous image depth. Dynamic climaxes seemed unfettered, the system (T+A DAC 8/ Mark Levinson No.383 amp/ Townshend Sir Galahad speakers) cruising effortlessly.

The system also appeared squeaky clean when playing 'Blågutten' from the *Quiet Winter Night* album by Norway's Hoff Ensemble. This is a 24-bit/192kHz download

of one of 2L's 24-bit/352.8kHz DXD recordings, the ensemble captured performing live in a Oslo church.

Here, the burnished trumpet sounded vibrantly clear and with little masking of detail, so that the subtle guitar embellishment was easily observed where on some systems it can be murkily clouded, overshadowed by drums and piano.

We also challenged the cable duo with something hard-edged

and spiky: AC/DC's rousing title anthem from 1981's *For Those About To Rock (We Salute You)* [Atco]. This rabble-rouser was delivered with immense vigour, bass and drums walloping forth with abandon, yet remaining tightly controlled. The Audioquests didn't hold back on the sibilant cymbal crashes and screaming vocal, although one might have preferred them toned down just a little.

Test-tracks ripped from CD included the title song from Shelby Lynne's *Just A Little Lovin'* album [Lost Highway], its fabulously intimate sound spoiled only by the very closely-miked vocal. The recording of drum kit, bass, guitar and electric piano is so beautiful you almost feel you're in the studio, live, with the performers!

The bass in 'Just A Little Lovin'' was truly meaty and richly textured, with tremendous extension, and the cymbals sounded most realistic in the naturally reverberant sound field. Where some cables could make Shelby Lynne's vocal appear hooded or accentuate sibilants, the sound of the Audioquest combination was particularly even-handed and well balanced.

VERDICT

Audioquest's Sydney/Type 4 combination sounded detailed and fresh; it served up 'open' sound images with impressively deep soundstages, richly-textured and with extended low frequencies. It made instruments sound real, and offered a just balance of openness and refinement. ⚡

ABOVE: The Type 4 speaker cable sports a smart woven outer jacket. Note the hollow 4mm banana plugs

BELOW: Audioquest's New Sydney interconnect has solid-core PSC+ conductors



'Trumpet was vibrantly clear and subtle guitar detail easily observed'

woven black jacket complete this attractive cable design.

While the Sydney interconnect is new, the origins of Audioquest's Type 4 speaker cable stretch back over 20 years. The geometry of the current version is not dissimilar to that of the partnering interconnect with mixed-diameter solid-core conductors for signal and return, insulated here in solid HDPE and terminated in silver-plated

HFN SPECIFICATIONS

	Interconnect	Speaker cable
Series Inductance (1m loop)	0.58µH	0.37µH
Parallel Capacitance (1m)	40pF	162pF
Resistance (1m loop)	190mohm	23mohm
Leakage	>350Mohm	12Mohm
Power Loss (8ohm speaker)		0.025dB/m
Price (1m RCA / 3m pair)	£149	£213



Spade-terminated loudspeaker cables
 Made by: In-akustik GmbH & Co. KG, Ballrechten-Dottingen, Germany
 Supplied by: Hi-Fi Network Ltd, Gloucs.
 Telephone: 01285 643088
 Web: www.in-akustik.com; www.hifi-network.com
 Price: £1474 (3m stereo set)

AUDIO
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In-akustik Referenz LS-1603

Arguably Germany's best-kept cable secret, the In-akustik brand is also remarkably extensive, offering everything from loudspeaker to Ethernet and analogue interconnects to HDMI, across four different ranges. The company also produces a range of custom-install accessories,

'This cable is built and finished with exacting attention to detail'

including ambient LED lighting solutions and in-ceiling speakers.

For its cable business, being an offshoot of the Braun Group, In-akustik is not short of resources. Even the copper in its conductors is smelted and refined in Germany, the highest quality OFC batches then being selected for its flagship 'Referenz' range of audio cables.

Top of the tree is its LS-1603 speaker cable, now available in the UK pre-terminated with In-akustik's own rhodium-coated KS-103 spade connections. A 3m set is priced at £1474, which buys a lot of very sophisticated and largely hand-made cable.

In-akustik's 'high-speed waveguide' geometry begins with 16 multicore conductors, grouped as signal and return pairs, that are wound around a hollow polyethylene

tube. Each conductor comprises multiple, lacquer-coated copper strands wound around a hard polyethylene core, insulated by an air-foamed polyethylene and jacketed in a polyethylene sleeve.

Measured in our laboratory, LS-1603 offered an incredibly low 6.3mohm/m series resistance and 0.13µH/m loop inductance but the Litz-like construction pushes

its parallel capacitance up to 303pF/m. So while the fabulously low 0.007dB/m power loss (or just 0.068dB over a full 10m loop) might augur well for very long runs, not all amplifiers will be equally happy driving lengths beyond this three-metre set.

POLISHED PERFORMER

The mono Devialet 800 amplifiers used in our system handled this reactance with impunity, the inserted lengths of LS-1603 cable encouraging a very smooth and civilised sound from the partnering B&W 802D loudspeakers.

Me'Shell Ndegéocello's 'Peace Beyond Passion' sounded clean and detailed, tending towards the sparse rather than cluttered when the going got really busy. So the bass is firm and crisp just as the treble is faintly restrained rather than wholly open and zesty.

But rather this than a sound that's too heavy or congested. There's no hint of splashiness here, so if you see the LS-1603 described as 'bright sounding' or 'emphasising detail' then it's just as likely the extra zing is coming from a lesser amplifier driving long runs. With a capable amp and speakers, it'll sound wonderfully polished.

VERDICT

While certainly in the 'high-end' bracket, In-akustik's Referenz LS-1603 is not as prohibitively priced as some on the market. The cable is clearly assembled with meticulous attention to detail and beautifully finished, and will surely last a lifetime. Some amplifiers may demur at driving lengths over the default 3m as it does present an above average capacitance, but as a tool for fine-tuning exquisite hi-fi systems, In-akustik's LS-1603 is likely to be just the ticket. ☺

ABOVE:
In-akustik's flagship Referenz speaker cable is directional – the 'ends' marked by solid alloy terminations. Each hand-made cable comes with a signed quality assurance certificate

HFN SPECIFICATIONS

Series Inductance (1m loop)	0.13µH
Parallel Capacitance (1m)	303pF
Resistance (1m loop)	6.3mohm
Leakage	100Mohm
Power Loss (8ohm speaker)	0.0068dB/m
Price (3m stereo set)	£1474

AUDIO
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XLR and RCA-terminated interconnect cables
 Made by: Townshend Audio, Surrey
 Supplied by: Townshend Audio
 Telephone: 0208 979 2155
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Townshend F1 Fractal-Wire

Cryogenic-cooling is not an unfamiliar concept to the audiophile world but Townshend Audio was certainly in its vanguard when it applied the technique to its Isolda-branded interconnects back in 2000.

These flat-conductor cables have formed an integral part of one of our audio systems ever since, so we were intrigued by the company's launch of a 'next-gen'

'The F1 Fractal has a dark quality that lets you hear into the soundstage'

EDCT (Enhanced Deep Cryogenic Treatment) interconnect, dubbed 'F1 Fractal-Wire', that employs an alternative geometry.

Like its DCT interconnects there's plenty of air – the ideal dielectric – surrounding the copper conductors inside their loose-fitting PTFE sheaths and outer, clear PVC jacket. But instead of two thin copper strips,

the Fractal interconnect has a fine enamel-coated signal strand loosely hand-wound around a thicker, central return conductor. Both benefit from EDCT and Townshend's proprietary 'Fractal-Wire treatment'.

SAFETY IN NUMBERS

To permit independent verification, Townshend Audio supplied us with two 18m lengths of 0.16mm enamel-coated wire.

The untreated batch offered a 15.47ohm impedance at 1kHz while the 'Fractal' version of the wire offered 13.75ohm – a reduction of some 10%.

Our other Lab measurements suggest that the F1 Fractal interconnect has a lower capacitance (37pF/m) but slightly higher series inductance (0.68µH/m) than suggested, although the 0.94ohm/m loop resistance is much lower than the rated 2.2ohm. Our figure makes more sense bearing in mind that the 13.8ohm/18m resistance of

the 0.16mm signal conductor equates to 0.76ohm for a 1m interconnect (with 175mohm for the thicker return core). This is still higher than average though, so we wouldn't be tempted to use it in very long runs. Price is £699/RCA-terminated 1m, £899/2m, £1199/3m, etc.

FUN WITH FRACTALS

Laced between an Oppo BDP-105D player/DAC and Krell S-1500 amp, Townshend's Fractal interconnects encouraged a genuinely smooth, detailed and liquid-sounding performance. The synth and guitar from Pink Floyd's 'Marooned' [*The Division Bell*; 96kHz/24-bit FLAC] soared into the room, while the percussion illuminated a vivid musical picture, free of grit or grain.

Like the older DCT-300 interconnects, the F1 Fractal has a 'dark' quality that lets you hear into the soundstage, walk around the musicians and oh-so-easily tease apart the threads of their mix. Bass sounds robust and extended, treble pin-sharp and sparkling but never too hot or fierce. And, yes, the balanced, XLR-equipped F1 Fractal (with two fine signal cores and a £50 premium) sounds even more transparent and finely-etched.

VERDICT

This is a cracking set of cables – Townshend may be rather coy about the Fractal process itself but the benefits of cryogenic cooling are already well established just as the elegant solid-core conductor and air/PTFE methodology ticks all the right boxes. They sound deliciously smooth and detailed, promoting the kind of easy-listening, inky-black backgrounds typically associated with the best audio systems. Go on, treat yourself! ☺

ABOVE: The F1 Fractal interconnect is terminated with Neutrik Profi phono plugs with retractable ground collars. Inside the cable a fine, enamel-coated signal strand is coiled around a thicker return/ground copper core

HFN SPECIFICATIONS

Series Inductance (1m loop)	0.68µH
Parallel Capacitance (1m)	37pF
Resistance (1m loop)	940mohm
Leakage	300Mohm
Price (1m RCA pair)	£699

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B&O Beogram 4000

The Beogram 4000's motor unit, arm and cartridge were designed together to work as one optimised system. B&O had considered building a conventional turntable with a long arm but this was rejected in favour of tangential tracking, the Beogram 4000's most famous feature.

The basic structure comprised a die-cast tray that served as the basis for the slim and elegant plinth. This housed another casting, which formed a floating sub-chassis. The suspension was constructed using three arched spring steel strips from which the sub-chassis hung on fine wires. This provided highly effective isolation from external vibrations.

Onto the sub-chassis were mounted a substantial bearing for the platter along with polished chrome runners which supported the arm assembly. The arm was moved by a lead screw driven by

motors for export (60Hz) markets. The speed could be fine-tuned and a stroboscope was fitted, viewable through a small window on the control panel through a series of lenses and mirrors!

A second arm carried a lamp and a photocell used to detect the presence and size of a disc. Following the command 'On', the arm would move inwards to the edge of the record and then lower automatically. If a 7in record was detected the speed would be automatically switched from the default 33.3rpm to 45rpm.

For cueing, pausing and track selection the arm could be moved manually using the four-way rocker plate, which formed the centre of the control panel. The system which controlled the automatic functions of the Beogram 4000 was implemented using digital integrated circuits and it was one of the first consumer products to employ this technology.

The arm was tipped with a moving-iron pick-up and this cartridge was unusual at the time because of its specific, non-replaceable stylus.

'The Beogram 4000 has surprisingly good timing for a belt-driven deck'

a servo motor of the ironless core type: an expensive component.

The platter, another heavy casting, was belt driven. Rather than have the motor connected directly to the mains, the designers chose to run it from an internal precision oscillator. This made automatic speed selection a realistic proposition and removed the need to provide different



A COMPELLING LISTEN

The Beogram 4000 has a smooth, silky, luxurious sound that encourages long listening sessions. Vinyl surface noise is unusually well suppressed too, making quiet passages and the gaps between tracks sound almost CD-clean.

Furthermore, the use of tangential tracking means that

distortion levels do not rise at the beginning and end of each side of the record (as they do with conventional arms), so after a while it is easy to forget that you're listening to vinyl.

Mussorgsky's *Pictures At An Exhibition* [RCA Victor] proved to be a compelling listen on the Beogram 4000. The recording requires a turntable which can set sudden bursts of activity against a quiet background, which the 4000 did exceptionally well.

The B&O rendered the percussion and woodwind, both of which occasionally become quite energetic, with an ease that left you wanting for nothing more.

At the bass end, the thundering subsonics of 'Bydlo' were both fulsome and accurate, suggesting that the sophisticated arm is at ease and well behaved. There was no loss of detail as each side came to a close (thanks to tangential tracking), so you are able to enjoy the likes of the 'Ballet Of The Chicks In Their Shells' as if it were optimally placed in the centre of the LP.

Along with an album of 12in remixes of Howard Jones tracks, The Pet Shop Boys' *Introspective* and Kate Bush's *The Kick Inside*, one of the LPs we tried was *Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark's Architecture And Morality* [Dindisc]. Here, we found that the Beogram 4000 possessed surprisingly good timing for a belt-driven deck.

VERDICT

This very early example of a tangential-tracking turntable shows just what the system is capable of when implemented with care. It is also very easy to use, its automation is foolproof, and it looks downright stunning, too. ☺

ABOVE: Slim, elegant and packed with the most advanced technology available, there was no other turntable quite like the Beogram 4000 when it appeared in 1972, and it remains a truly iconic design

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.21rpm (-0.38%)
Time to audible stabilisation	3sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.06% / 0.06%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-67.3dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	See lab report
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-62.5dB
Power Consumption	17W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	490x100x381mm / 12kg



Sony TTS-8000

Direct drive was viewed with suspicion here by many in the 1970s. Elsewhere, high-end direct-drive units from the Land of the Rising Sun were snapped up.

The TTS-8000 is now widely regarded as the second best turntable Sony ever made (first place goes to the company's PS-X9, aimed at studios). But the runner-up reviewed here did a sterling job in straddling both the domestic and professional markets.

Sony's TTS model designation indicates that it was a design originally supplied without a plinth. Interestingly, it chose not to give the '8000 a new designation once mounted. Prototype plinths made in wood were superseded by the company's Sony Bulk Moulding Compound: a mixture of fibreglass and polyester said to have excellent resonance absorption properties. The arm bases were also made from

'read' by a sensor and the signal compared to a reference to enable precise control over the turntable speed. On the TTS-8000 this could be defeated, enabling a $\pm 4\%$ pitch adjustment for 33.3 and 45rpm.

A small front flap hid the minor controls, although strangely this included the speed change switch. Outside could be found the power and start/stop buttons, plus 33.3, 45 and X-Tal lock indicator lamps along with the strobe illuminator.

The TTS-8000's platter is a 1.6kg diecast damped aluminium design with black strobe markings on a silver painted background. Sony's excellent OL-2K mat contained an internal layer of very thick oil to aid damping and to enhance a neutral sonic performance.



MUSICAL INSIGHTS

Fitted with an SME 309 arm and Ortofon Kontrapunkt B cartridge, the Sony impressed from the first bars of music. Some find a direct-drive turntable too matter-of-fact, even sterile, but this is not a criticism that can be levelled at the TTS-8000.

While it's true that its presentation isn't rosy and cuddly, it offers musical insight by the bucket-load and brings a fine sense of poise and stability to everything it plays.

Kari Bremnes' vocals on 'A Lover In Berlin' [Norwegian Mood – Kirkelig Kulturverksted] were beautifully rendered and shimmered delightfully soundstage centre. The underpinning bass and percussion work was also clean and clear.

'Sony's TTS-8000 offers insights by the bucket-load and has a fine poise'

SBMC. They have an aluminium top and are most often to be found with SME cutouts.

The turntable itself was a technological masterpiece. Based around a brushless and slotless DC servo motor, it used the X-Tal (crystal) Lock system. The inner surface of the platter was coated with magnetic barium ferrite; as the platter rotated the barium was

Something with a little more grunge to it can often unseat a turntable that majors on crispness and clarity. Yet 'Magic Man' from Heart's *Dreamboat Annie* [Arista] proved that the Sony was more than capable in this area. Ann Wilson's vocals soared while the backing electric guitars had just the right amount of edge to them.

A good direct-drive like the Sony offers a somewhat different take on low-end performance. Rather than adopt the piledriver approach that idler-drive designs do so well, the Sony digs deep, but with a much more fluid sense of rhythm when it comes to the upper bass. Plenty of detail, taut timing and a feeling of enthusiasm that draws you into the music is most definitely the order of the day here.

As a result, bass lines are fast, tight and blessed with a sense of pace that can leave you breathless. This was showcased perfectly by 'The More You Live...' from A Flock of Seagulls' *The Story Of A Young Heart* [Jive Records]. The track positively galloped along, percussion as sharp as a tack and Frank Maudsley's bass line as spry as could be wished for.

At the top end, the Sony continues to impart its signature sense of neutrality. Nothing is overblown and yet the deck offers a marvellous sense of insight and clarity. In soundstage terms, the Sony also scored highly.

VERDICT

A superb unit, the Sony TTS-8000 direct-drive is now sought-after. It can still show a clean pair of heels to many modern designs and offers an authoritative and dynamic, yet fluid and musical, sound. ⬆

ABOVE: Our sample of the TTS-8000 direct-drive unit was mounted into a very heavy chassis with adjustable feet. We used an SME 309 arm and Ortofon Kontrapunkt B cartridge. The 'TTS' designation originally implied a unit supplied without a plinth

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.29rpm (−0.12%)
Time to audible stabilisation	2sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.04% / 0.03%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	−68.8dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	−72.0dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	−60.9dB
Power Consumption	35-11W (8W idle)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	535x135x450mm / 18kg

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Cambridge Audio CD1

Back in the 1980s, Compact Disc's tantalising promise of 'perfect sound forever' was taken as gospel in many quarters. However, one man was dissatisfied with its performance and set about improving matters with typical fervour.

The engineer in question was Stan Curtis of Cambridge Audio and the result of his labours was the CD1 player. Introduced in 1984, it effectively changed the face of CD reproduction – and not just due to its multi-box construction.

Bass was a particular area of concern, as Curtis felt that players generally were not reproducing the low-end information of which the CD was theoretically capable. He also concluded that the main problems were actually coming

'Delicately tapped jazz hi-hats had our feet stirring instantly'

from the beginning of the chain: the laser scanning mechanism.

Curtis observed that many of the parts making up a CD transport were of relatively poor quality. As a result, the rotating disc often vibrated, moving up and down and making the servo's job much harder than it needed to be.

So he devised a proper isolation set-up for the laser system with

the laser mounted on a spring and rubber damper; this, in turn, was fitted to a lead beam suspension.

Measurements showed a huge reduction in reading errors with this suspension, it also formed the basis of the third box in the full CD1 set-up – the optional Quality Assurance Module, which showed error rates. Now the error correction capabilities of the player could concentrate on correcting data issues from the disc itself, rather than faults introduced by the scanning system.

From his work with Cambridge Audio's amplifiers, Curtis realised the importance of the power supply in the chain and he specified three transformers: one each for the control circuits, logic, and the analogue output stage. The DAC implementation was also rather more novel than existing designs.

Finally, the integrator stage of the CD1 was spread over three circuits, each with relatively low

gain and minimal filtering to minimise distortions. This was followed by a filter section with selectable options and a high quality analogue output stage.



LOCKED INTO THE BEAT

Whereas many players of the time sound shrill, thin and somewhat fatiguing, the CD1 is a very different beast. It has a fulsome sense of

ABOVE: Although it may look like four boxes, the full CD1 set-up with the Quality Assurance Module (bottom) comprises only three separate enclosures as the top 'two' are actually one. Inter-box connections were made using DIN sockets. Two rear sets of phono sockets provided for analogue output, with both fixed and variable options

authority and positively bounds along when fed a good beat.

With Mark Knopfler's *Golden Heart* [Vertigo] we were impressed by the sheer punch and impact of the drum beats during the introduction to 'No Cannibals'. When the track broke into its stride, the Cambridge CD1 again locked onto the beat and the bass, overlaying the vocals on top very neatly indeed. The vocals themselves were also well rendered.

Once again, the backbeat to tracks like 'Still The Only One' from the Webb Sisters' *Daylight Crossing* [Mercury] was firm and taut, but accompanied by a fine sense of space around instruments. Treble was also delightfully clean and crisp, but without any of the associated glare and hardness that can mar the experience of early digital products.

It soon became apparent that this 'musicality' transcended genre and artist. Grand classical pieces thundered around the room with pomp and fervour, delicately tapped jazz hi-hats had our feet stirring instantly, while simple vocal material proved emotive and delightful. The latter was showcased well by 'Laura' from *The Haunted Man* [EMI]. Here, Natasha Khan's plaintive vocals were a delight, if delivered with a slight underlying lack of absolute purity. What was beyond reproach was the beautifully rendered backing piano.

VERDICT

The Cambridge Audio CD1 was a landmark product and instantly made other players sound dated – quite a feat when they were only two years old! Even today it is a highly entertaining listen, despite having a few rough edges. Ⓟ

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level / Impedance	4.12Vrms at 73-1.5kohm
A-wtd S/N ratio	108.5dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0026% / 0.015%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.056% / 0.018%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.65dB to -0.48dB
Digital jitter	925psec
Resolution @ -90dB/-100dB	+1.4dB / +1.3dB
Power consumption	30W
Dimensions (WHD)	450x260x300mm



Ferrograph F307 mk2

British company Ferrograph, as its name suggests, has its origins in the production of tape recorders. After the Second World War it successfully marketed a series of professional machines based around the sturdy Wearite deck.

Having mastered this most difficult of components, it would have been relatively straightforward for Ferrograph to diversify into other lines. But its first integrated stereo amplifier is one of the most interesting. This 20W model was introduced in 1969; styled to match its Series 7 open-reel recorders, the F307 broadened the appeal of the Ferrograph range.

The amplifier offered a compelling package of near-professional build quality with styling that did not look out of place in a home environment. The circuit was conservative in its design, but offered a few points of technical interest – not least in its use of a field effect transistor (FET) in the first stage of the line level preamp.

'Vocal clarity was excellent and the sound neat and well ordered'

An RIAA amplifier/equaliser for MM cartridges was built in with a range of selectable loading options. The F307 also offered tone controls and switched filters, the latter being set at 5kHz, 7kHz and 10kHz.

The power amplifier inside the F307 was conventional and ran from an unregulated single-rail 65V supply. The use of a single-rail supply mandated AC coupling to

the loudspeakers via a 1050µF series capacitor. This low value and the high supply voltage both hint at the F307's preference for 15ohm loudspeakers, although the amplifier is specified to work with speakers between 8-16ohm.

Some of the F307's other design details were unusual at the time, eg, the main input selector switch is located at the rear of the chassis connected by an extension shaft. This minimises internal cable runs. Similarly, the mains transformer has a screened enclosure, which keeps the transformer's magnetic field largely contained.

In 1973 a mk2 version of the F307 was released (as reviewed here) with a claimed reduction of harmonic distortion and an improved S/N ratio. Larger output transistors were fitted too.

LACKING IN BASS

Connecting the Ferrograph to modern equipment we encounter the old nuisance of small RCA connectors positioned too closely together to accommodate modern bulky plugs.

Loudspeaker connections are made via standard DIN sockets, so there are no problems here. Those for tape recording are at line level, although the outputs are not buffered – which is odd given Ferrograph's expertise in this area.

Operation is straightforward, once you find the array of extra controls hidden under the hinge-down flap at the bottom of the fascia. One ergonomic shortcoming is that the treble, bass and volume controls have separate concentric

ABOVE: Neat and restrained in styling, the front panel of the F307 was designed to match Ferrograph's Series 7 tape recorders. The wooden sleeve made it suited to home use. Hidden behind a drop-down flap towards the bottom of the fascia are tape inputs, stereo/mono and extra filter controls

sections for the L/R channels, which are not friction locked together.

It is difficult to criticise the Ferrograph's bass, not because it's perfect but because there isn't really any! There seemed to be at least an octave missing from the bottom end, irrespective of volume settings and the CD being played.

This robbed Chris Isaak's 'Wicked Game' [Reprise] of warmth and glow, and while this lack of bass meant that some usually obscured detail in the guitar strumming and percussion was now revealed in all its glory, it was clear the track's essential character was changed.

This, to us, is the F307's major flaw. The situation may well improve with the use of higher impedance loudspeakers, but with our Monitor Audio PL100s the sound proved a bit too lean and dry.

On the other hand, vocal clarity on the Chris Isaak's track, and a number of other vocal-led recordings like 'Don't Marry Her' from *Blue Is The Colour* [Go! Discs] was excellent and the sound was neat and well-ordered. What the F307 does, it certainly does well.

Overall, the F307 mk2 sounded brisk and airy, The upper midrange is forward and the treble sounds a trifle clipped. But this makes sense given the likely sources and loudspeakers the unit would have been partnered with.

VERDICT

The Ferrograph F307 mk2 earns a reserved recommendation for its purposeful character and excellent quality of construction. It's slightly fiddly to operate or match to other components, but its well marshalled, vocal-orientated sound will have bags of appeal. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	27W / 30W
Dynamic power (<1-2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	35W / 45W / 35W / 22W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.54–1.77ohm
Frequency resp. (20Hz–100kHz, 0dBW)	–1.6dB to –5.9dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/20W)	40mV / 180mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/20W)	75.4dB / 88.4dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.065–1.00%
Power consumption (idle/rated output)	32W/107W
Dimensions (WHD)	410x127x245mm

Internal processing 5,6 MHz, 72 bits
Formats PCM 24 bits up to 384 kHz,
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Q
Quintet

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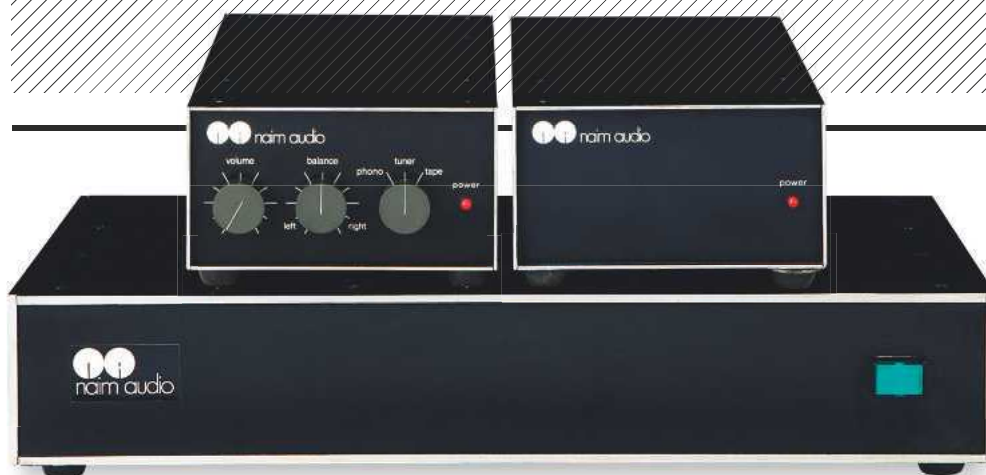
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Naim NAC 12/ SNAPS/NAP 250

Naim Audio's first product, the NAP 160 power amplifier, was introduced in 1971; the NAP 250 appeared in 1975. It was technically unusual in that it used a strictly regulated power supply, whereas the vast majority of power amplifiers, unlikely today, typically made do with an unregulated one.

Arguably, the NAC 12 preamp was even more unusual than the NAP 250. In ultimate form it required a standalone external power supply – the SNAPS – at a time when such an arrangement was virtually unheard of. It also favoured DIN connectors over the more popular phono and it soon became modular internally, with a motherboard and six (later seven) daughter boards. This allowed moving-magnet and moving-coil

aluminium extrusion, cut and bolted together to form the four sides of the case, with bolted aluminium top and bottom plates. In 1980 the case was redesigned to use a rectangular extrusion that formed the top, bottom and sides, creating the 'chrome bumper' version.

The output transistors were bolted to an internal, mid-mounted heatsink which allowed each amplifier board and its regulated power supply board to be mounted, neatly, end to end.

The NAC 12's construction changed too, from an initial design with bolt-on sides to one where the top panel bolted down onto sides that were aluminium extrusions.



A SOLID PRESENTATION

In our test, the NAC 12 proved to be a bit too sensitive when it came to a CD player with a 2V output, so the action of the volume control action was rather abrupt.

The Naim components aren't that easy to set up.

As noted, the high level

sources are connected to the NAC 12 unit via DIN connectors. The connection for a turntable is made via BNC connectors, but simple in-line adapters are easily obtained. Connecting the SNAPS also involves another special cable.

The regulated supplies of the NAP 250 helped to give a really solid and confident presentation at all listening levels. In fact it was

impressive to hear how increasing the volume level did little to alter the character of the sound and instead simply made the presentation louder.

With Mark Knopfler's album *Golden Heart* [Vertigo], that famous and familiar guitar sound enjoyed tremendous grip – helped in no little part by the NAP 250's power reserves – though both vocals and guitar would have benefited from more warmth. Some of the tracks sounded somewhat two-dimensional, 'No Can Do', in particular, failing to connect in its usual, emotional manner.

On the other hand, female vocals reaped the rewards of the Naim's sheer presence. Katie Melua's 'Halfway Up The Hindu Kush' from her album *Piece By Piece* [Dramatico] was delivered with superb midrange lucidity, each word projected from the speakers with a fine sense of precision. True, dryness was noted around the backing instruments but in terms of vocal clarity the Naim system made a very good case for itself.

The quality of Naim's phono stage also compared favourably with a decent modern one, even if the sound was clipped at the frequency extremes. *Fickle Heart* by Sniff 'N' The Tears [Chiswick] provided a satisfying listen with only heightened surface noise between tracks as compared to best-in-class performers to detract.

VERDICT

The Naim system proved to be an arresting listen, whether with CD or vinyl. Devotees in tune with 'the Naim sound', are sure to love it – sparse facilities, complicated setup, rough edges and all. ☺

ABOVE: Stripped down and ready to rock – the NAC 12 preamp offers just three inputs (phono, tape and tuner) and no tape loop while the SNAPS does not have a mains switch. The NAP 250 is also bereft of the power meters and speaker selectors found on many Japanese amps of the period. Instead, Naim Audio spent its money where it counted: inside

'Devotees of the "Naim sound" are sure to love it ... rough edges and all'

disc input stages to be quickly swapped, and facilitated servicing.

Naim's preamp circuits used a single voltage rail and capacitor coupling and were inherently quite simple, although extensive use was made of two-transistor constant current loads to improve linearity.

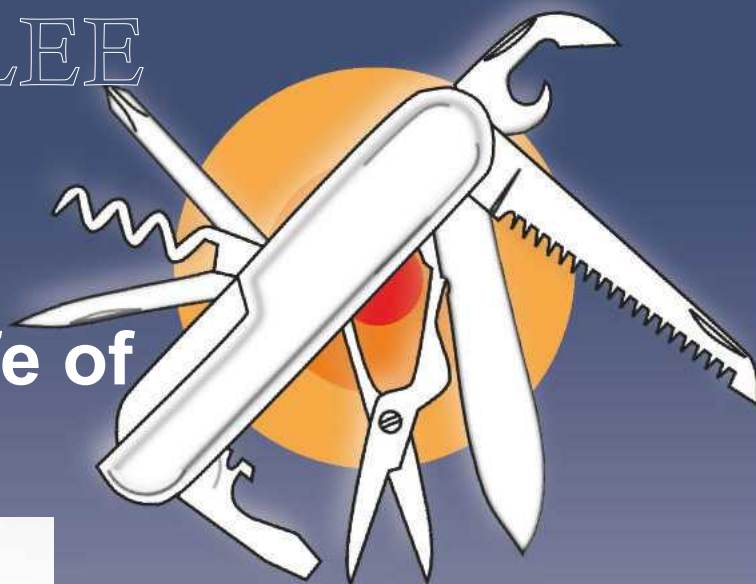
In its initial form – and as reviewed here – the NAP 250 was constructed using a custom

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	80W / 140W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	80W / 135W / 140W / 62W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	2-125ohm / 0.23–0.26ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–100kHz, pre/power)	–0.2 to –7.9dB / +0.0 to –7.0dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	91mV / 183mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	95.0dB / 101.5dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	0.0205-0.021% / 0.0016-0.025%
Power consumption (Idle/rated output)	15W/307W (6W preamp)
Dimensions (WHD, Pre/Power)	144x76x300/430x76x300mm

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Superior Performance Hi-Fi Products



Quad 22/Quad II

The Quad 22 control unit and II power amplifier have both enjoyed a presence on the hi-fi scene almost from its very beginnings. The 22 appeared in 1959 but the matching Quad II power amplifier had been around since 1953.

Like most amplifiers then, the 22/II was split into separate units, for mounting inside a larger cabinet. The compact 22 came with a basic metal shell so that none of its working parts was exposed should it be left free-standing. The circuits used in each unit are well executed, if basic. The real genius of the Quad system is the way the various units all fit together. Mains power and input signals are supplied to the 22 where all the controls are located. Two colour coded umbilical cables then carry both power and audio signals to the Quad II units.

The recommended loudspeaker was, of course, Quad's classic ESL 57

'The Quad 22 control unit is beautifully styled and a delight to use'

electrostatic. To best match these, the amplifiers all left the factory with their output impedance set to complement a 15ohm load.

Despite its flexibility, the 22 really only has one usable input for modern line-level sources. This is the one intended for the stereo tuner, although even this is a little over-sensitive for modern equipment so an attenuator may be required.

Setting up is easy, but connecting sources brings with it the usual old British amplifier nuisance of oddly-sized RCA connectors fitted too close together. Thankfully the loudspeakers can be connected to the amp with traditional 4mm plugs. The only potential pitfall is that the six-way 'Jones' plugs, which mate with each Quad II, are not that positively polarised and therefore can be inserted upside down. This will blow the fuses if you are lucky and cause considerable damage if you are not.

The 22 is beautifully styled and a delight to use once the operation of the push button source selector has been mastered. The filters also take some working out. Note that the 'cancel' position also switches out the treble and bass controls.

NEVER FLUSTERED

It has been popular in recent years to use the Quad II amplifiers with modern preamplifiers or other equipment, but the design of the input circuit means that this is not ideal. All too often a thick, muddy sound with fuzzy detail will result. Using

the 22 as originally intended solves these problems.

Offering around 15-20W per channel, the Quad system has just about enough power to meet most listening requirements without having to make excuses for itself.

Uncluttered and predominantly acoustic recordings seem to favour most competent valve amps so we began with a selection of these.

ABOVE: At a time when most consumer audio equipment looked either industrial or home made, the neat styling and ergonomics of the compact Quad 22 control unit were a revelation. Note the custom-made cabling between the control unit and the amplifiers, epitomising the professional approach taken by the manufacturer

One such disc was the spirited performance of 'Don't Marry Her' by The Beautiful South from *Blue Is The Colour* [Go! Discs] where bright and lively guitar and percussion lines are overlaid with supremely detailed vocals. For such an old design the tonality was even-handed, bass was clean and dry, while the midband was pleasingly vivid. Separation between instruments and players was fine, but sounds seemed to come from *areas* in the soundstage rather than specific points.

Although more heavily processed, the 22/II also made easy work of 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel' [*And Winter Came*, Warner]. This recording is backed by a variety of low frequency drones which will sap the power from any transformer-coupled amplifier. Nevertheless, at all but the very highest listening levels the Quad IIs refused to become flustered.

VERDICT

Using the Quad II in its original context makes most sense. As for the 22, this is a masterpiece of industrial design. Luckily, the Quad duo reviewed here is perhaps the most widely available complete vintage valve amplifier pairing to be found secondhand. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	22W / 20W
Dynamic power (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	24W / 18W / 11W / 7W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.45-0.73ohm
Frequency resp. (20Hz-100kHz, 0dBW)	+1.7dB to -6.9dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/15W)	36mV / 150mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/15W)	72.4dB / 84.2dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 1W/8ohm)	0.045-0.39%
Power consumption (Idle/rated output)	210W/220W
Dimensions (WHD, 22/II)	265x90x150/310x160x120mm

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**John Bamford –
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Vade Forrester – The Absolute Sound

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**John Bamford –
Hi-Fi News**

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Marja & Henk – 6moons

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Hi-Fi News

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RB – Suffolk

For existing PS Audio customers who already own a Perfect Wave DAC Mk2 – an upgrade path to the DirectStream DAC is available for you.

Please contact your approved PS Audio dealer, listed below, for more information.



Paul Miller Editor

Technician and writer on all things audio for some 30 years, Paul Miller took over the editor's chair in 2006. He invented the QC Suite, used across the audio industry

Stereo's new status

It's easy to get side-tracked by the proliferation of headphones, headphone amps and portable USB DACs. There's a bigger picture developing where hi-res stereo is king, says **Paul Miller**

So headphones are cool again and, whether the hi-fi snob likes it or not, it's been the corporate marketing muscle of Beats *et al* that have made it happen. Audiophiles like you and I should be grateful because the spin-off has been an explosion in R&D targeted at far higher-end cans. Would Oppo, for example, have put its resources into developing the flagship PM-1 [p82] if the mass market had not already provided sufficient momentum? I think not.

Moreover, those reporters who forever think hi-fi's glass is half-empty will tell you the *only* thing that's happened in 2014 is headphones. Er, no. In fact the growth in headphone sales is a reflection of the general consumer's growing appreciation of higher quality audio across the board. At both ends of the market, the messages about MP3 sound and the benefits of high-res 48kHz+ downloads are gaining traction.

TOMORROW'S AUDIOPHILES

Frankly, I don't really mind if a driver towards higher-res music files is simply that storage space on portable players is less of an issue in 2014. The fact that ordinary consumers are willing to entertain the concept that better sound is possible, is good enough for me. A fraction of one per cent of these enlightened music lovers will be the audiophiles of tomorrow. But that fraction will be enough to keep our passion not only alive but thriving.

Proof of renewed interest in quality audio is evident from the biggest guns in consumer electronics: Sony and Panasonic. First shown at the Berlin IFA in 2013, Sony's HAP-Z1ES HDD-equipped media player and partnering TA-A1ES

'Panasonic has announced the return of its iconic Technics audio brand'



ABOVE: Technics' flagship amplifier confirms the improving status of high quality stereo

amplifier started shipping in 2014 [p55]. Not only were these the first serious stereo components to arrive from Sony in 15 years but their *raison d'être*, and that of Sony's more affordable player/amp system, was hinged on the growing popularity of high-res music downloads. Whether it was the music market reaching a tipping point that prompted Sony to act, or the other way around, doesn't really matter. What matters is Sony's *reach* into the consumer's consciousness and its

ability to further raise awareness of high-res audio and the delights of high quality music reproduction. The stuff that you and I take for granted, of course.

PERFECT PARTNERS

This year's IFA lit another fire in the hearts of all hi-fi aficionados as Panasonic announced the return of its iconic Technics audio brand. Two new series of products will be based on the 'Technics

Definitive Sound' concept, and both will feature network audio players compatible with the highest resolution music media. The Reference Class R1 Series will be of greatest interest to *Hi-Fi News* readers, consisting of three hi-fi audio components designed to 'deliver superlative musical experiences'. They are the SU-R1 network audio control player, the SE-R1 stereo power amplifier [pictured above] and SB-R1 loudspeakers.

HEAR IT LIVE

Technics' system will launch after our Windsor Hi-Fi Show in November but I can promise you the first full technical review of the R1 series in *HFN* very soon after. In the meantime you can experience the sheer scale and impact offered by the highest high-end systems by treating your ears to a day at the Windsor Show [see p16] where many of the products in this Yearbook will be featured.

Next year, with both Sony and Panasonic backing serious stereo, perhaps 24/96 downloads will become mainstream! To my mind, there's never been a better time for optimism. ☺



Barry Fox Technology journalist

Barry Fox trained in electronics with the RAF and worked as a patent agent, but he gave that up to enter journalism. He is one of the world's top technology writers

Live in person

An opportunity to talk to Wynton Marsalis about live sound was the high spot of the year for **Barry Fox**, who found a musician whose sensibilities could teach audio engineers a thing or two

The high spot of the year for me was the chance to ask musician Wynton Marsalis for his views on music and audio.

Wynton Marsalis, whose recordings are now often used for hi-res audio demonstrations, has had a longstanding interest in promoting music education through collaborations with audio companies. For instance, in the late 1990s he and Harman International founded the 'Harman: How to Listen' programme, which conducted multi-city tours aimed at inspiring eight- to 14-year-olds to pursue careers in music.

CRYSTALLISED WITH CLOUT

When Marsalis was in London recently with the Lincoln Centre Jazz Orchestra, between concerts he met with music students and teachers at the Barbican. I grabbed the opportunity to thank him for avoiding the use of concert amplification wherever possible.

His words crystallised with clout what I have long been preaching in *HFN* – that live sound is now seldom a yardstick by which to measure home audio quality – and should surely be compulsory reading for musicians and audio engineers. So I'll quote verbatim:

'Live sound is now seldom a yardstick by which to measure home audio quality'

'I carry that torch (of using minimal amplification) almost alone in my field. It's because I have a tradition of playing also classical music. With a symphonic orchestra if there is too much of the trumpets you will never hear the violins.

'In the 1970s when I was playing funky pop music the music was always so loud. Our band had ten people. Two guitars, a synthesiser, electric bass, four horns, people singing, people on congas. It was funky but damn it was loud. I remember after two or three

RIGHT: Trumpet player Wynton Marsalis champions live sound, always choosing to play without amplification if the acoustics allow it. In July this year he played with the Lincoln Center Orchestra at the Barbican in London



years of playing, thinking that if I could just come home at night and not have my ears ringing I'd be grateful for that.

'I was so used to playing loud that when I started playing jazz trumpet and we set up on the bandstand each horn player would have a monitor. The piano

player would have a monitor. The drummer would have a monitor. The bass player would have an amp and a monitor.

'One night, for some reason, I looked round the bandstand and

thought "we are all two feet from each other" so why do we all need monitors? Everyone would ask for more of themselves in their monitor because everyone else was so loud. Bass players all played with amps so you never thought to ask a bass player "can you *not* play with an amp?"

'The thing about jazz and its balance is that the bass is supposed to be the softest instrument, because the bass player's volume forces the drummer to play soft. Once the bass player plays loud, he can play louder than the drummer. The

drummer is then free. It would be as if the oboe players or viola players came to a concert with amplifiers and could say "no-one can hear the oboe part, so let me turn it up". Now the bass players are going to go crazy. Then the tuba players want amps – and the string section...

BALANCING ACT

'We never developed our sounds. It has become a tradition. So when I was in my early 20s I began to stop doing it. That hasn't stopped anyone else from doing it. But we in the LCJO stopped doing that and for the last 30 years we have tried to play in balance.

'If we cannot sound good two or three feet from each other, we cannot control our instruments. The sound engineer is not going to do that (for us).

'So we still struggle with balance. We asked ourselves after the concert last night – how can we play in better balance? A (classical) orchestra is aware of the need to be in balance on the stage. For some reason in jazz we lost that understanding.

'We think that with monitors the sound man is going to fix it. But he's not going to fix it.' ☺



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Barry Willis

Journalist for top American audio-video publications

While his main interest is high-end audio, Barry Willis also writes about the culinary industry, visual art and theatre for a huge variety of US newspapers and magazines

Full steam ahead

It was the year the headphone market more than mushroomed, it went crazy, says **Barry Willis**, while at last the terms 'wireless' and 'audiophile quality' became no longer mutually exclusive...

Twenty-fourteen will be remembered as the year that the headphone market went totally bonkers. In May, Apple announced its intention to acquire the Beats headphone brand and its associated music service for \$3.2 billion, a figure that astounded even the most jaded observers of Silicon Valley excess.

By early August, the financial press reported that Apple was well on its way to overcoming hurdles put up by US and European Union regulators. With the announcement of EU approval came one from French entertainment conglomerate Vivendi stating that Apple had purchased its 13% stake in Beats for \$404 million, previously owned officially by Vivendi's Universal Music Group, whose Interscope Records division (founded by Beats' Jimmy Iovine) claims such stars as Eminem and Lady Gaga.

Apple's announcement stated: 'Today we are excited to officially welcome Beats Music and Beats Electronics to the Apple family. Music has always held a special place in our hearts... Beats co-founders Jimmy Iovine and Dr Dre have created beautiful products that have helped millions of people deepen their connection to music.'



ABOVE: SMS Audio's BioSport In-Ear 'phones with light sensors – see www.smsaudio.com

Then in mid-August microprocessor giant Intel announced a programme launched with rapper 50 Cent ('Fiddy') to develop earbuds for exercise. Projected to hit the market late in the year, SMS Audio BioSport In-Ear headphones have light sensors that using the RunKeeper application help track a user's heart rate for display on a connected smartphone.

SMS Audio makes headphones in the \$70 to \$200 range, and claims less than 1% of the global headphone market. Fiddy's credentials in biotechnology didn't accompany the announcement.

REFINEMENT NOT REVOLUTION

Twenty-fourteen was a year of no major breakthroughs in the high-performance audio niche. Incremental improvements, of course, were apparent to anyone attending industry trade shows – in particular, the proliferation of USB DACs and headphone amplifiers, and refinements to wireless technologies and Class D amplification, combined in sleek, lightweight but powerful designs. 'Wireless' and 'audiophile quality' are no longer mutually exclusive.

After attending three major shows this year, one fact became abundantly clear to me: this industry's complete lack of imagination when it comes to naming products. Approximately half of the hundreds of products seen, heard, and examined sported names of the 'VG-10XD' alphanumeric variety, perhaps with some meaning for their makers but absolutely unmemorable for consumers.

Then there's the plurality of purportedly high-end products using some variation of 'Reference' and 'Signature' – the Reference 2.0, the Baby Reference, the Reference Junior, the Reference Signature. Can we please give this tired trope a rest? Lastly, the most significant news this year, for me

'After attending three major shows this year, one fact became clear to me'



ABOVE: Zach Hambrick at msutoday.msu.edu

at least, came not from the recording and playback industries but from the realm of psychology and human performance.

AMERICAN MYTH

Leading an international team of researchers, Michigan State University professor Zach Hambrick in May published a widely-covered study refuting one of our most persistent beliefs: that

practice makes perfect. Innate talent is a far more important factor in the development of musical virtuosity and other exceptional abilities, Hambrick and his colleagues

found. Endless hours of practice can't make anyone a superstar unless they are already gifted – a fact of life that any athletic coach or music teacher will readily acknowledge, but one that runs counter to a myth long persistent for Americans. We like to believe that anyone with determination and discipline can achieve anything he wishes.

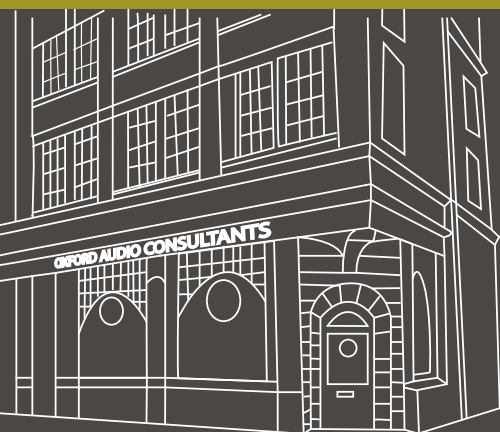
The truth is that training can give people a degree of competence, but it can't give them talent. That, thankfully, still comes from unknown sources. ☺

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Jim Lesurf Science Journalist

Jim Lesurf has spent a lifetime in audio, both as an engineer at UK hi-fi company Armstrong and reader in Physics and Electronics at St Andrew's University

For the record

It may be 2014, but the highlight of the past 12 months for **Jim Lesurf** was buying new and secondhand LPs. Yet making digital copies of them sparked an interest in some cutting-edge tech

If you'd asked me back in, say, 1994, whether there'd be much interest in vinyl 20 years hence, I'd have said no. My assumption was that the public's interest in LPs would fade to the extent that they would become items only of historic interest, just as 78rpm shellac discs are viewed today.

I'd also have said that some improved digital system would eventually come along and displace CD. And I would have said the new contender would be based on higher capacity optical discs.

However, back then I thought that the practical understanding I'd built up about how the LP system works – RIAA equalisation, etc – would become about as relevant as knowing how to change a ribbon on a manual typewriter in the days of the word processor.

POOR PRESSINGS

I'd also become weary with the poor pressing quality of many classical music LPs issued at the time. So I found CD a relief from the succession of off-centre LPs I had bought made using damaged and worn stampers.

I've recently been re-reading John Culshaw's excellent, but sadly unfinished, autobiography, *Putting the Record Straight*. If you have any interest in the history of recording classical music I'd recommend it. I found it fascinating

for the details relating to Britten's *War Requiem*, which I regard as one of the most moving recordings ever made.

The book gives real insight into both why Decca was an outstanding company, and the seeds of its eventual demise as an independent label.

I wouldn't have been surprised by the eventual appearance of high-resolution files available as downloads. But I

'As things stand, LPs are more convenient to buy than hi-res downloads'



ABOVE: PS Audio's NuWave Phono Converter is an analogue-to-digital converter able to accept analogue audio at line level and output it at 24-bit/192kHz LPCM and 2.8/5.6MHz DSD via DoP

wouldn't have anticipated the muddled market that currently exists where you may have to visit a variety of different websites to obtain the recordings you want and enter your credit card details over and over again. Nor the insanity of websites that will only sell you files if you live in the 'right' country. How long will this continue?

I hope we will soon see some decent one-stop sites where you can get any available download you want without fuss. These sites would have a UK address in case problems were encountered, be run by knowledgeable staff willing and able to talk to you

by phone and, who knows, maybe I'll even one day find that I have internet bandwidth high enough to download a file in less time than it takes to play it.

Given the current frustrations, and my preference for physical media with detailed accompanying text, the LP remains attractive. Remarkably, as things stand, they are more convenient to buy than high-resolution downloads. So here

I am in 2014, and my highlight of the year is buying new and secondhand LPs of all things. OK, I do now tend to play the LP just once, making a good digital copy. I then keep the disc safely packed away and play the digital file from then onwards. This avoids the risk of any wear or damage, and makes playing the music more convenient, as I can avoid all the 'LP cleaning rituals' required to achieve optimum results.

NEW KIT

One consequence of this has been that I've now developed an interest in finding excellent USB ADCs to make the digital transfers I then play. Most recently this led to my using a Benchmark ADC1 USB for recording. So when it comes to audio equipment, the Benchmark is my highlight of the past 12 months.

I'm also beginning to seriously consider buying some more new kit. This has been sparked by my spending time looking into the behaviour of PS Audio's NuWave Phono Converter as an RIAA preamp and as a DSD ADC.

As yet I'm still working on this, but one thing's for sure, it is certain to make the next 12 months interesting ones. ☺



Tim Jarman Electronics Engineer

Tim Jarman has been repairing and collecting vintage hi-fi for over 20 years. He is an authority on both classic B&O equipment and the Sony Walkman series

A new vintage

If the vintage scene is to remain vibrant it must embrace components from more recent times, but these products bring a new challenge. **Tim Jarman** says 2014 marked a new chapter for classic kit

Back in the early '80s, car manufacturers began to produce vehicles that used substantial amounts of electronics. As these gained in popularity, it was predicted that breakers' yards would soon be crammed with pristine-looking cars, sidelined only due to the failure of some obsolete or unobtainable 'black box'.

As we now know, things didn't quite work out like this. Accidents, corrosion and mechanical wear are still the reasons why most cars are taken off the road.

Hi-fi also became more complex during this era. What had once been simple analogue circuits, packaged up in pretty casings, suddenly became all high-tech, as manufacturers struggled to retain the appeal of their products in the face of competition from home computers and video systems.

NEW CHALLENGES

On average it takes about 20 to 30 years for a hi-fi product to complete the cycle from 'new model' to merely secondhand, or emerge as a recognised and coveted vintage item. This means that the early microprocessor-controlled components are now very much part of the vintage scene. If the scene is to avoid becoming stale and stuck in a particular era we must learn to deal with the new challenges that maintaining equipment like this brings.

Fortunately, the equipment released in the 1980s is fundamentally durable – it must be or it would be extinct already. By contrast, some of the latest smartphones are designed for a service life of just a few years.

One of the reasons why the vintage scene has thrived is its ability as a community to overcome problems.

'The willingness to tackle problems is how classic hi-fi continues to thrive'



ABOVE: Quad's FM4 was one of the best tuners of the 1980s and offers digital tuning, but a digitally controlled tuner usually features a microprocessor, which can now be difficult to replace

In the early days these problems mainly consisted of sourcing valves and transformers for amplifiers or rubber drive components for turntables, in order to repair models that no longer enjoyed factory support from their manufacturers.

Newer products bring additional challenges: namely the software that runs inside them and makes them work. This isn't software like that used today – widely distributed, easily downloaded and simply transferred to an ailing appliance. We're talking here about embedded codes,

written on specialist machines and then etched into the silicon of the devices when they were made. Most, if not all, of this stuff was never released in any form other than that found in the complete

product. Once the spare chips have run out, that's it. Or is it?

LOST SOFTWARE

I've recently been participating in a project to recover lost hi-fi software. It involves building a new microprocessor for the component in question around available devices, and then re-writing the software to run on it from scratch. This sounds laborious and it is, but if the vintage scene is to continue to thrive and we are to avoid

simply passing round the same Quad IIs and Leak Stereo 20s until they all finally fall apart, it is work that has to be done.

The situation is better with some models. These have their software stored on devices which with a little ingenuity can be read and copied – a little like high-speed dubbing a cassette.

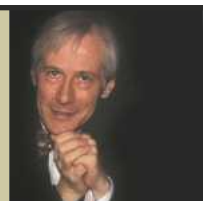
What is needed is a central repository for this copied software and an agreed data format. Then, as with service manuals, problems can be solved if sufficient numbers of the vintage community get on board.

PROTECT AND SURVIVE

In the meantime, what can you do to preserve your microprocessor-controlled artefacts? Mains spikes are a major killer, so unplug your gear when you are not using it. And an effective 'office grade' surge protector is also a good idea. Many of the ones sold for domestic use are not really up to the job.

Faulty power supply circuits inside the unit can also blow the micro's mind, so have these checked by a qualified electrician and, if possible, have any tired components replaced if your equipment has had a busy life in the past.

This, then, is the new frontier for vintage at the end of 2014. That there is a willingness to tackle these problems shows that classic hi-fi continues to thrive. Bravo to that! ☺



Christopher Breunig Music Journalist

Christopher Breunig trained as an architect but became won over by music and collecting classical recordings. He was *Hi-Fi News'* Music Editor from 1986-2000

All Tuned up

This year **Christopher Breunig** made a couple of system upgrades for high-res digital replay. But 2014 has also brought, sadly, the loss of two major international musical figures...

This time last year I was writing about the Chord QuteHD DAC and more recently I've been wondering how to get even better sound with high-res downloads. A first step seemed to be to upgrade the cables from laptop to DAC and preamp.

I settled on Chord's Signature Tuned Array (replacing its SilverPlus USB, which scored well in last year's Group Test, and the cheaper Prodac Pro Digital coaxial) – ahead of the findings of the Jul '14 GT. A good choice confirmed by the Editor's conclusion. (I did try going back to the SilverPlus USB, but the two Signature cables together obviously had a synergy.)

The only snag with them is their stiffness, and I had to rethink the connections to and from my Musical Fidelity V-Link₁₉₂ and from DAC to preamp – both are lightweight boxes easily shunted if you moved the cables a few centimetres!

LINEAR POWER SUPPLY

It has to be said that the Chord DAC's wall-wart and thin little cable supplying 12V DC look distinctly unworthy, although they certainly do the job. But

RIGHT: The Chord Company's Signature Tuned Array came top in our July '14 Group Test of ten USB cables. Its four coaxial conductors are silver-plated, insulated with a PTFE dielectric and separately shielded



now I have replaced them with the linear power supply made by Mains Cables R Us, comprising two well-finished boxes – the smaller one sits about 0.5m away from your DAC – and associated cabling with earth connection (you can order upgrade options: see www.mains-cables-r-us.co.uk).

The QuteHD always takes time to come 'on song' but after half an hour I began listening, then switched power supplies and was impressed by the big improvement in resolution. Audio forum postings suggest 'more bass', which (thankfully) is rubbish – what you get is a more exact focus on instrument positioning and a wider dynamic range that is stress-free.

I was listening to Prokofiev's abrasive Violin Sonata No 1 [Hyperion, 96kHz/24-bit] and with the MCRU the ear could cope with the loudness of piano as in real life, while the violin's ethereal 'wind in a graveyard' first-movement effects were far more truthful tonally.

In short, two significant improvements to my system and well worth the outlay.

CLAUDIO ABBADO

In what proved to be his final appearances at the August 2013 Lucerne Festival, Claudio Abbado programmed Schubert's 'Unfinished' Symphony and Bruckner's

Ninth, also unfinished. The Bruckner has now been issued on CD by DG [479 3441] and, in some territories, as a 48kHz/24-bit download.

Whether or not it was tasteful to include a photo of the conductor leaving the platform (as the CD tray liner) is questionable – the music is symbolic enough, surely. And it's not easy simply to listen to the music – the final *Adagio* especially – without reading all sorts of things into the interpretation. Did the audience know (as the booklet note suggests) that these would be Abbado's final stage appearances? Did Claudio

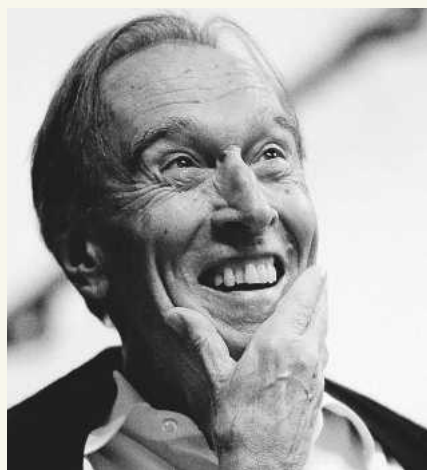
Abbado himself discover some new resolve in Bruckner's music, as it veers away from despair to secure new vistas of hope?

We do know that, even in his

last weeks (he died on 20th January), he'd been studying more Schumann: the Fourth Symphony, which might have followed the fine Second with his Orchestra Mozart [DG 479 1061].

As with Sir Colin Davis, the record companies have put out several reissue boxes – which they have yet to do in the case of Lorin Maazel, the third great conductor we have lost in the space of fifteen months. ☹

'With the MCRU, the ear could cope with the loudness of piano as in real life'



ABOVE: Claudio Abbado – his last recording, Bruckner's Ninth has been issued on DG



Steve Harris Contributing Editor

Steve Harris edited *Hi-Fi News* between 1986 and 2005. He loves jazz, blues music, vinyl and vintage hi-fi and anything that makes good music come to life

A year in the making

Turntables, valves, Class D amps... for **Steve Harris** it was a year that overturned some long-held audio prejudices and underlined that it's not the materials designers use, but how they use them...

For me, more than ever, 2014 brought proof that different hi-fi designers can get comparably good results when they start from principles that are wildly different, or even mutually opposed. During this past year, I've been lucky enough to experience some truly great products, and their excellence has overturned some long-held prejudices.

To start with, there was a rather unusual turntable from Germany, the STST Motus II [see *HFN* Jan '14]. I should have said, *extremely* unusual...

My formative years in audio coincided with what we could now call the Linn Era, starting from the mid-1970s. I'd never actually worn a 'Rock Against Technics' badge and I'd never become a Linn/Naim 'Flat Earther'. But I had been conditioned (or brainwashed) into believing that direct-drive turntables were profoundly evil, and the cause of most of the problems in the world.

TYPICALLY TEUTONIC

Fortunately, as time went on, I learned that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, if it makes you pre-judge any hi-fi component this way.

Anyway, in 2014, along came the STST Motus II, looking like a typically Teutonic high-mass, solid-chassis belt-drive player. But there is no belt, as that big fat platter has a

powerful direct-drive motor underneath. Even more surprisingly, it's supported on a spring-suspended subchassis.

After the STST, though, I had the good fortune to be given the Clearaudio Master Innovation turntable to review [see *HFN* Apr '14]. For this high-end model, Clearaudio threw nearly all the features of its Statement flagship, apart from the over-the-top 'pendulum'

chassis. So you got the benefit of contactless magnetic drive as well as the Ceramic Magnetic Bearing. I'd expected it to sound impressive, but I wasn't ready for the way it could be inviting and beguiling as well.

After all this though, I got hold of the Rega RP8 [May '14]. Rega had been pretty chuffed when the RP8 was selected by designers Jony Ive and Marc Newson for their '(RED)' charity auction in November 2013. A stock RP8, customised only with the signatures of Roy Gandy and Phil Freeman, sold for \$40,000.

CULMINATION OF A QUEST

So I was eager to see how much it could really improve on the excellent RP6. Actually, it exceeded any expectations I had. This player is a culmination of Roy Gandy's quest to make the turntable chassis as light and rigid as possible, in an approach that's completely opposed to that of the massive players coming from Germany. And it has a superbly vibrant, dynamic, foot-tapping sound.

As for amplification, at the end of 2013 I'd had the chance to listen to an upmarket Class D amp, the Burmester 101 [see *HFN* Jan '14]. Using this with the excellent Burmester 102 CD player made me realise how good Class D could be. But it was still nice to get back to valves with the Icon Audio MB90 MkII monoblocks

[see *HFN* Mar '14]. They produced a truly exceptional sound for the money.

Soon, I was able to hear another thermionic eye-opener, at a much more luxurious level. The VTL S-200 Signature stereo power amp [see *HFN* Jul '14] lived up to VTL's promise to make tubes user-friendly, and it sounded glorious.

After this, I was treated to a spell with a very fine hybrid amplifier combination



ABOVE: 'Exceptional sound for the money' – Icon Audio's £2900 MB90 MkII monoblocks

from Modwright. With the tubed LS36.5 preamp and the solid-state KWA150 power amp [see *HFN* Aug '14], designer Dan Wright has tried to get the best of both worlds. I think he succeeded.

INTELLIGENT LISTENING

I felt almost a sense of homecoming with the Modwright pair because the clear, open, exceptionally detailed sound reminded me of how impressed I'd been, years ago, with Wright's earlier SWL 9.0 preamp. It had a sonic signature that seemed to bear witness to a huge amount of intelligent listening and component tweaking that had taken place in the development.

But then that's really true of all the products talked about here. Different designers work with different materials and different technologies. What's important is what they put into it, the way they go the extra mile to make their product really sing. I'm just glad that they go on doing it. ☺

'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, if you pre-judge any hi-fi this way'

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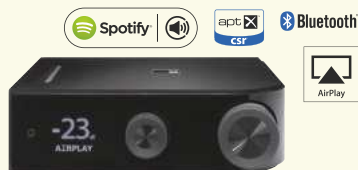


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WINNERS 2013
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ROKSAN CASPIAN M2

WHAT Hi-Fi?
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BEST CD PLAYER
ROKSAN CASPIAN M2

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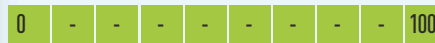
BOB DYLAN

Blonde On Blonde

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 3-45009 (three 45rpm LPs)

When dealing with a reissue from tapes that are 48-years-old, one wonders how they defied ageing. I have no idea how CBS stored them, but I can tell you that I have *never* heard this masterpiece sound so visceral, natural or – simply – real. This is one of my most-played Dylan albums because of the presence of treasures like ‘Visions Of Johanna’ and a personal favourite, ‘Just Like A Woman’. With session players that included Al Kooper, Kenny Buttrey, two members of The Band and Joe South, and with Dylan on a career high, the results were truly spectacular. Mofi has packaged this in a gorgeous box with three heavyweight LPs playing at 45rpm. Buy it now, or expect to pay a grand for it on eBay. *KK*

Sound Quality: 95%



THE ALLMAN BROTHERS BAND

Eat A Peach

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 2-398 (two discs)

As one who loved The Allman Brothers Band from their first LP (1969), I was among those who couldn't face this, what was effectively a tribute to Duane, killed in a motorcycle accident in Oct 1971. While two sides of this 2LP set contain a seemingly interminable jam, and much of the rest comes from the live Fillmore East sessions, it somehow manages to possess the virtues of a new studio release as well as serving as a testament to one of the greatest guitarists who ever lived. Forty years on, the pain has nearly subsided and it's easy to hear why it ranks with the best the band ever did; this is Southern blues-rock at its finest. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%



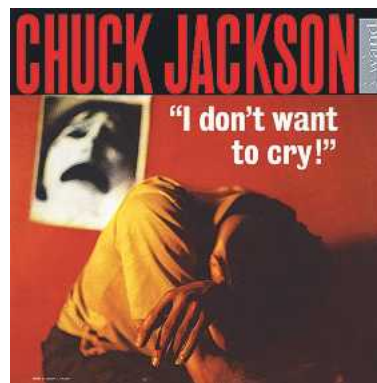
DONOVAN

Mellow Yellow

Sundazed LP 5430 (mono; 180g vinyl)

Some find the continued flow of mono reissues puzzling, but they're aimed at the hardcore fan. This particular release from 1967 features the killer title track – as minimalist a recording as you could ever want to hear – and still possesses the kind of layering and details you'd think were strictly the province of multi-tracked stereo supersessions. The percussion, vocals, the tacky brass – leaving aside the rumoured presence of one Paul McCartney and other assorted superstars – this is an engaging opener, followed by charmer after charmer. Folk material, a whiff of jazz, nascent psychedelia... all hint at later masterpieces, but this one simply delights. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%



CHUCK JACKSON

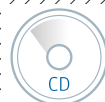
I Don't Want To Cry!

Sundazed LP5426 (180g vinyl)

What would we do without Northern Soul fans... and labels like Sundazed? Jackson is one of many overlooked soul geniuses who didn't attain the levels of success he merited. This sensational debut from 1961 deserves a spot in any soul library, the singer's pedigree alone warranting one's attention: he sang with doo-wop legends The Dell-Vikings and performed with Jackie Wilson's Revue before signing with Wand Records. The set shows versatility, Jackson leaning toward the more urbane soul rather than the down-and-dirty. How many singers can add to signature tunes like ‘Tears On My Pillow’ or ‘Lonely Teardrops’, songs owned by those who made them hits? *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%





COMPACT DISC



SUPRAAUDIO



DVD



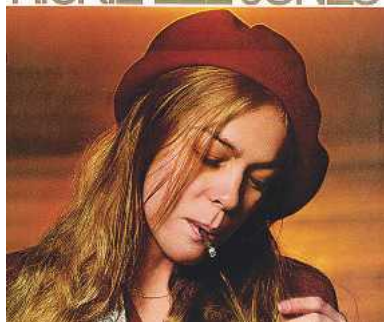
BLU-RAY



VINYL



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ORIGINAL MASTER RECORDING
RICKIE LEE JONES**RICKIE LEE JONES**

Rickie Lee Jones

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 2-45010 (two 45rpm discs; 180g vinyl)

In anyone's list of all-time audiophile faves, whether standard pressings or specialty releases, this eponymous debut from 1979 is enjoying a spectacular reissue for its 35th Anniversary. As with *Blonde On Blonde*, this plays at 45rpm and exhibits the sort of care once lavished only on snooty classical box sets. My own distaste for it is based on 15 repeated playings in one afternoon of 'Easy Money' when I foolishly agreed to participate in a *Hi-Fi Choice* listening session. That aside, it is sexy, jazzy, cool and – with the sensational opener of 'Chuck E's In Love', plus guests and session stars like Steve Gadd, Randy Newman and Dr John – worthy of its demo reputation. *KK*

Sound Quality: 95%

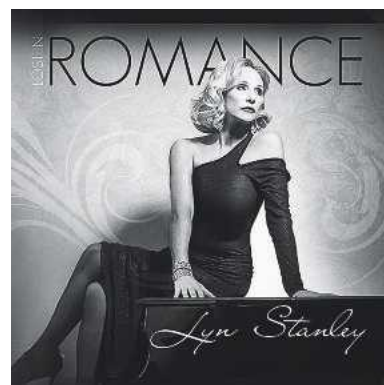
**NILSSON**

Aerial Ballet

Sundazed LP4568 (mono; 180g vinyl)

A rare, 'late mono' LP issued in 1968, Nilsson's second solo – or third, depending on what you think of his earliest, 'primordial' releases – was a masterpiece praised by no less than The Beatles. It contained the sublime, Grammy-winning take of Fred Neil's 'Everybody's Talkin'', immortalised in *Midnight Cowboy*, as well as the achingly tragic 'One'. Nilsson was never easy to describe, let alone shoehorn into a genre – among his achievements was producing one of the first LPs of standards by someone from the rock world. This set ranges from the whimsical to the intense, ever rich with charm and invention, if now sounding a bit twee in places. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

**LYN STANLEY**

Lost In Romance

See www.lynstanley.com (two 45rpm LPs)

Lyn Stanley's debut contains standards delivered with such composure and skill that it's hard to believe this chanteuse has only been singing professionally for four years. Discovered and mentored – after huge success as a ballroom dancer – by Paul Smith, long associated with Ella Fitzgerald, Ms Stanley self-financed this gem, inadvertently creating an audiophile's delight. Something possessed this newcomer to 'our' world to go for 180g vinyl, 45rpm playback, mastering by Bernie Grundman – she was as surprised as anyone by its reception. The 15 cuts are sung with elegance rather than flamboyance, à la Helen Forrest and Doris Day. Gorgeous. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

**THE BAND**

The Band

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-419 (180g vinyl)

Yes, this received '90%' in March for the SACD, but the vinyl is something else. To recap, The Band's eponymous sophomore LP, from 1969, is – for many – the finest thing they ever did. Then again, The Band's practice sessions are better than 99% of the world's musicians could hope to match. Here we have stunning examples of Americana-via-Canada as 'The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down', 'Rag Mama Rag', 'Up On Cripple Creek' – what am I talking about? Every single one of the 12 tracks is a treasure, this album responsible for doing more to sire alt.rock and roots music than any other. With a first-rate US pressing, you will hear differences, but many will prefer this vibrant reissue. *KK*

Sound Quality: 95%



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THE BAND

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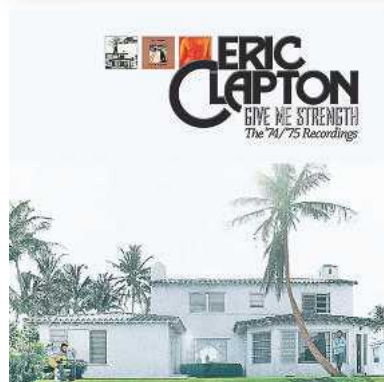
LOVE

Da Capo

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2130 (stereo SACD)

Probably the most cult-ish of all the Left Coast bands of the 1960s, and LA rather than San Francisco, Love featured the wayward genius Arthur Lee and a band of equally colourful, vagabondish musicians who defied the norm. At a time when experimentation (musical and chemical) was *de rigueur*, but psychedelia dominated, Love made some of the most complex and delicate music of the era. For a band to open their eponymous debut with a Burt Bacharach cover was tantamount to treason. But Love's second LP, though not rated as highly as their third, is utterly gorgeous, and contains their classics, 'Seven & Seven Is' and 'She Comes In Colors'. Just ignore the rather self-indulgent last track – all 19m of it. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%



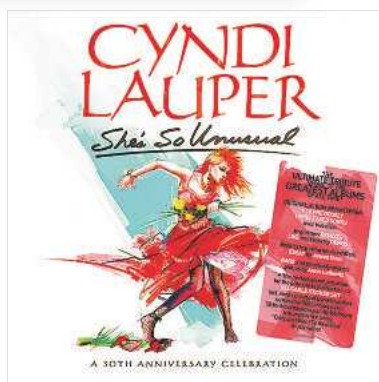
ERIC CLAPTON

Give Me Strength

Polydor 0602537545940 (five CDs +1 Blu-ray Audio disc)

After the deluxe *Layla*, fans have another feast bordering on the gluttonous. Unusually, it may be the first time a rock artist's complete output from a specific period has been packaged this way: extended versions of *461 Ocean Boulevard*, *There's One In Every Crowd* and the live *EC Was Here* on three CDs; CDs of his sessions with the late Freddie King and live tracks from the period; plus the two studio albums also offered in Blu-ray Audio with *461* in 5.1 surround and both in period quadraphonic! Best remembered as his comeback years, the music is the now-familiar blues-plus-roots-rock, the sound is superb, the extras a joy. Devotees will want this. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%



CYNDI LAUPER

She's So Unusual

Portrait/Epic/Legacy 88883706352 (two discs)

Whether or not this is 'one of the greatest albums of all time', it was a huge hit in 1984 and did more for 'Girl-Power' than any Atomic Kitten, Girls Aloud or even Spice Girls effort – which could not have existed without Lauper's anthem. Yes, this set gave us 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun', the elegiac 'Time After Time' and the controversial 'She Bop'. Concurrent with the equally successful/influential Bananarama, this paean to pure attitude succeeds because it is so musically polished and 'poptastic' in the finest sense. This reissue adds ten unreleased songs, remixes, demos and live tracks, in a package that's so cutesy/girly it's beyond ironic. An absolute delight. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%



DEAN MARTIN

This Time I'm Swingin'

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD2135 (SACD)

OK, so I'm an oddball who rates Dino above Frank, and tied with Nat 'King' Cole. But savour just one play of this stunner from 1960 that found him working with conductor/arranger Nelson Riddle – a match made in heaven – and you'll find it hard to disagree. Dino always made it sound easy, which may be why some critics balk at recognising his superior delivery over his Rat Pack buddy's forced approach. Just listen to two usually-mannered songs from *My Fair Lady* – 'On the Street Where You Live' and 'I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face' – and how he makes them swing. Filled with standards delivered with aplomb, with sound you can't fault. Also on vinyl. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%





COMPACT DISC



SUPRAAUDIO



DVD



BLU-RAY



VINYL



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ELVIS PRESLEY

Elvis At Stax

RCA/Sony Legacy 88883724182 (three discs)

No, not a lost 'Elvis Does Soul' package: while he certainly admired the musicians of Stax, pundits suggest he chose the studio as much for its proximity to his home. A study of an almost-forgotten detour in his career, the sub-titles are self-explanatory: CD1 contains 'The R&B and Country Sessions' plus outtakes, CD2 'The Pop Sessions', outtakes and 'The July 1973 Masters', and CD3 'The December 1973 Masters', explained in Robert Gordon's liner notes. Originally issued on 45s and LPs, *Raised On Rock*, *Good Times* and *Promised Land* with its eponymous hit, this set reveals one thing: Colonel Parker/RCA were foolish for not releasing it cohesively 40 years ago. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%



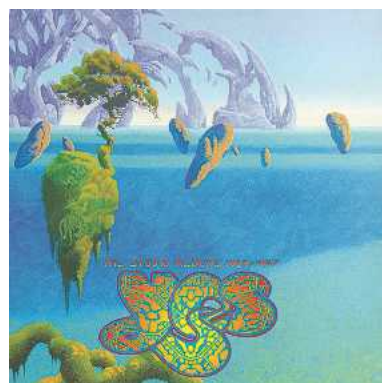
STEPPENWOLF

Steppenwolf

Analogue Productions CAPP 50029 SA (SACD)

Although familiar to anyone who was sentient in the '60s, or who has a retro fetish that includes repeated viewings of *Easy Rider*, this masterful reissue reveals just how good Steppenwolf's 1968 debut sounds. Audiophiles are aware that Dunhill Records – home of The Mamas and Papas – could deliver sonic masterpieces, but who knew that this early example of 'hard' rock was so well-treated in the studio? I have never heard 'Born To Be Wild' sounding so visceral, the biggest shockers being the sense of space during the drum break at 2m 07s and the fluidity of the bass. The guitar opener on 'Your Wall's Too High' is also a revelation. It's on vinyl too. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%



YES

The Studio Albums 1969-1987

Atlantic 8122796496 (13 discs)

After the Nilsson, Dylan, Tony Bennett, *et al*, box sets, the single-purchase collection has reached one of the more accessible of the prog rock acts, with 12 consecutive studio LPs (one on two CDs), presented in an ideal fashion. Each LP comes in a mini card sleeve like the original, in a box with fresh artwork from Roger Dean; and every CD contains bonus material, including tracks previously only issued in Japan. In sequence, one can chart Yes's evolution from a sharp rock outfit with fabulous taste in cover material (eg, The Beatles, Buffalo Springfield), to a grandiose but rarely precious outfit capable of issuing stuff so scintillating that it qualifies as audiophile must-have. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%



THE WHO

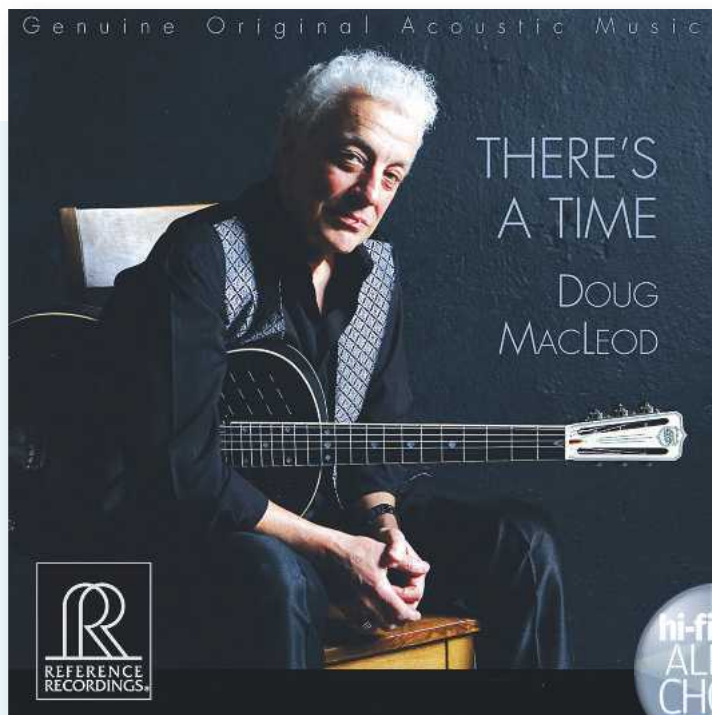
Tommy Super-Deluxe Box Set

Polydor 3747396 (three CDs + Blu-ray audio disc)

Not solely to blame for creating the rock opera – *Mastermind* candidates could name at least two others – *Tommy* is a milestone in the evolution of the rock album *per se*. It stands up well, a coherent if fanciful tale that's secondary to excellent music; many tracks work well out of context, like those that make up *Sgt Pepper* (which may or may not be a concept album depending on your choice of critic). Reissued countless times, this must be the ultimate: Disc 1 with the original album, Disc 2 with unreleased outtakes, Disc 3 is the album in 5.1 surround on Blu-ray, while Disc 4 is a 'bootleg' of a live show from 1969. In a slipcase with poster and 88-page hardback, it's a perfect companion to the deluxe *Quadrophenia*. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%





DOUG MACLEOD

There's A Time
(88.2kHz & 176.4kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.hiresaudio.com; Reference Recordings RR-130

If you've got a system capable of suspending disbelief and you're a fan of the blues, recordings don't come much better than this. Dim the lights, turn up the wick and you'll swear bluesman Doug MacLeod is sitting at the end of your room. Reference Recordings' technical director 'Prof' Keith O Johnson has been a darling of the US high-end scene for more than 30 years, renowned for his audiophile recordings. This was his first blues project. MacLeod, together with

bassist Denny Croy and drummer Jimi Bott sat in a circle on a soundstage at Skywalker Sound in May '12 and played 'live', the hi-res recording capturing the true-to-life dynamics of the performance. It's available as one of the label's 'HRx' discs, the 176.4kHz/24-bit master file burned to a DVD-R. Since they cost \$45 plus shipping, this download is a great way to add the file to your library. *JB*

Sound Quality: 95%



NIELSEN

Symphonies 4, 'Inextinguishable', and 5; Royal Stockholm PO/Sakari Oramo (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.ecclassical.com; BIS-2028

David Fanning sets out composer and public responses to these two complex and interrelated works from 1916/22 in a fine booklet note. These are symphonies I've struggled with over the years, in recordings by Jascha Horenstein, Neeme Järvi, Colin Davis, Leonard Bernstein, *et al*, and at last a superb new coupling where the conductor and his Stockholm orchestra hand me a key, opening the door *at last*... This is because the sound is so beautiful, the strings often heard *ppp*, and clarinettist Hermann Stefánsson well deserving his booklet credit for his playing in No.5, yet Oramo still captures the rawness, the abruptness of the symphonic argument. It was all spaciouly recorded in the orchestra's concert hall, and produced by Jens Braun (his name cropping up frequently now – *eg*, recent Hyperion releases). Outstanding! *CB*

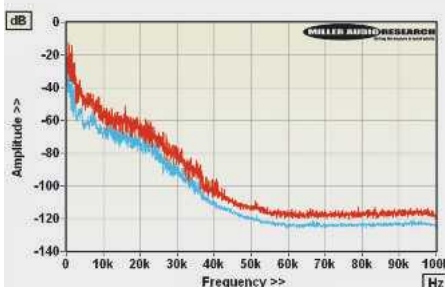
Sound Quality: 95%



OUR PROMISE

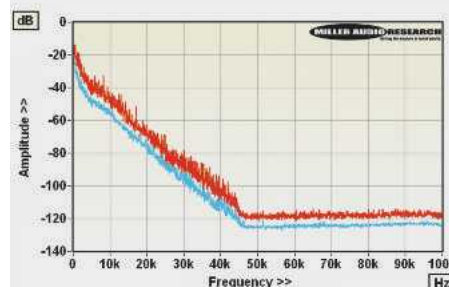
Following our Investigation feature [*HFN*, Jun '11] where we examined the claimed quality of high-resolution downloads, *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* is now measuring the true sample rate and bit-depth of the HD music downloads reviewed on these pages. These unique reviews will be a regular source of information for those seeking new and re-mastered recordings offered at high sample rates and with the promise of delivering the very best sound quality. *PM*

LAB REPORT

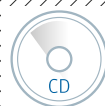


Recorded for RR's HRx 176.4kHz/24-bit DVD Data Disc format (HR-130), the choice of sample rate is also perfect for downsampling to CD or upsampling to DSD. This file is the real deal though, and the bandwidth is fully utilised. *PM*

LAB REPORT



Our analysis of this genuine 24-bit/96kHz file [Graph; No. 5, *Tempo giusto – Adagio*] reveals much of the ultrasonic energy as orchestral percussion right out to the ~45kHz cut-off. A 192kHz recording would have captured even more! *PM*



COMPACT DISC



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DVD



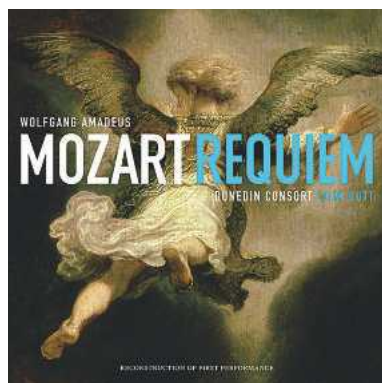
BLU-RAY



VINYL



DOWNLOAD



MOZART

Requiem in D minor, K626, etc; Soloists, Dunedin Consort/John Butt (192kHz/24-bit; FLAC/ALAC)

www.linnrecords.com; Linn Records CKD 449

Linn already has a fine Mozart Requiem under Sir Charles Mackerras [BKD 211], using a version by Robert Levin, but this new production from Greyfriars Kirk Edinburgh is a reconstruction of the first performance, based on a new edition of Sussmayer's completion of Mozart's score. There's also the *Misericordias Domini*, K222, and two movements from the Requiem Mass first heard a few days after Mozart's death in 1791, and given with just a handful of voices. (Repeating *Requiem aeternam* and *Kyrie*, this simulation has different musical tensions from the main performance.) The 16-strong chorus shows tireless energy, with four of its members taking solo parts. Butt's direction is akin to cleaning an old painting – colours emerging with a new vividness. This is an important realisation of a well-loved work. *CB*

Sound Quality: 95%



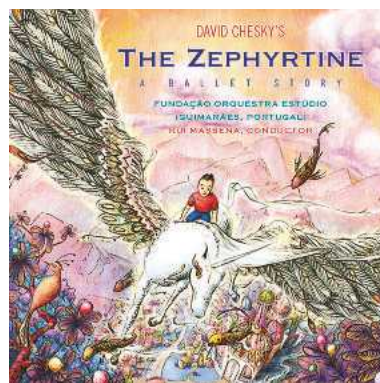
KEITH JARRETT

Somewhere (96kHz/24-bit; ALAC/FLAC)

www.hi-resaudio.com; ECM2200 276 6370

It is 30 years since Jarrett's mesmerising *Standards Trio* with Gary Peacock and Jack DeJohnette took its first try at taking known tunes to unknown places, but there's nothing remotely stale in this 2009 performance recorded live in Switzerland. Despite the unpromising intro, there's a spectacular rise into Miles Davis' 'Solar', while the big J's melodic modifications of 'Stars Fell On Alabama' are as entrancing as the raw rhythm slices of 'Devil And The Deep Blue Sea' are baffling. The grail here is the central 20-minute coupling of Bernstein's 'Somewhere' with Jarrett's own complementary composition 'Everywhere', the former's bluesy sequences yielding rich plateaus of improvisation. All is enhanced by engineer Martin Pearson's delivery of both ambient soundstaging and close stereo-miked piano clarity; you'll never miss a moan. *JF*

Sound Quality: 95%



DAVID CHESKY

The Zephyrtine – A Ballet Story;

Fundação Orquestra Estúdio/Rui Massena

(96kHz/192kHz/24-bit; AIFF/ALAC/FLAC/WAV)

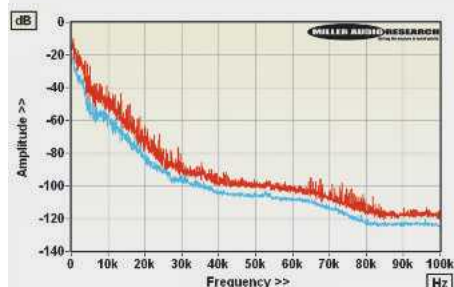
www.hdtracks.com; Chesky Records ID363

David Chesky is committed to fostering music education in young children and composed *The Zephyrtine* as a fantasy ballet. The booklet includes the narrative – in which a young boy meets a magical creature and travels to a utopian world where people are of all colours and ice cream grows on trees – along with vibrant illustrations by artist Ângela Vieira. Chesky's musical language is colourful and engaging, combining Prokofiev-like sections with Latin influences to create varying moods. The orchestra was recorded using a solitary Neumann KU-100 binaural head and Mytek ADC at 192kHz/24-bit. You don't even have to close your eyes to be transported to the concert hall. It's not particularly intimate, but the sound is gloriously true to life and the dynamics spectacular. *JB*

Sound Quality: 90%

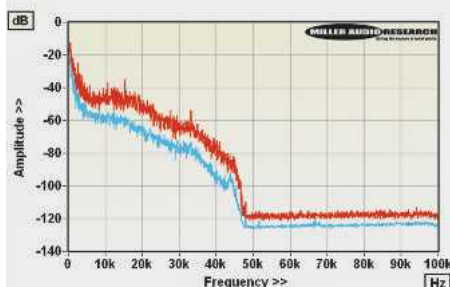


LAB REPORT



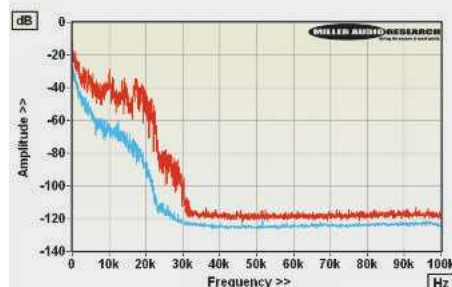
Linn offers this Requiem in a variety of resolutions, with this 'Studio Master' file the highest available at 192kHz/24-bit. Presumably the native record rate with 'information' out to 80kHz, but peaks >60kHz are likely to be spurious. *PM*

LAB REPORT



While this is a true 96kHz rendering with good dynamic range, almost all the energy from 10kHz-40kHz is related more to the accompanying percussion than piano. There is also a clutch of spurious tones from 30kHz-45kHz. *PM*

LAB REPORT



Recorded with bags of headroom to spare (a full orchestral flourish from track 11 is illustrated above) the practical musical bandwidth does not significantly exceed that possible from a 48kHz render. (96kHz version tested here.) *PM*

SERIES V~12

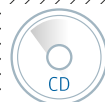
MAGNESIUM TONE-ARM

Based on the multi-award winning Series V pick-up arm, the Series V~12 incorporates the same design and engineering that have made SME a byword for excellence. Coherent musical control is held over the entire frequency range in terms of tonal quality, stability and stereo imaging. Startling dynamic range, neutrality, structurally inert, the Series V~12 embodies every worthwhile feature in a pick-up arm. The 12 inch tone-arm is pressure die-cast in magnesium complete with an integrated headshell to eliminate tone-arm resonances in the audio spectrum and offers a 27% reduction in maximum angular error distortion over 9 inch models. Listening; the benefits of minimal tracking error and harmonic distortion are clearly revealed.



SME

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COMPACT DISC



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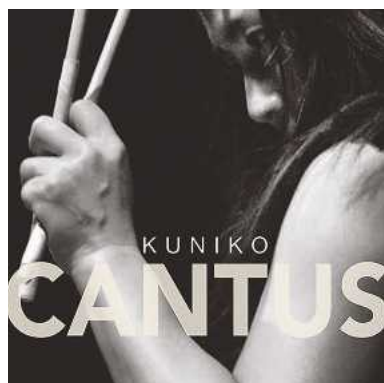
BLU-RAY



VINYL



DOWNLOAD



CANTUS

Kuniko (192kHz/24-bit; FLAC/ALAC)

www.linnrecords.com; Linn Records CKD 432

This second Linn album by the young Japanese artist Kuniko Kato comprises arrangements, mostly for marimba, of well-known minimalist pieces by Steve Reich and Arvo Pärt. She also plays a solo work by Hywell Davies, *Purl Ground*, premiered by Kuniko at Cheltenham in 2011. Reich's *New York Counterpoint* works better in transcription here, I feel, than *Fratres* [marimba/vibraphone], *Spiegel im Spiegel* [marimba/bells] or the *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten*, although Kuniko hopes her own versions might attract an even wider audience. These elaborate recordings took place in three Japanese venues each with a different acoustic character: eg, an ancient church for *Für Alina* [vibraphone/crotales] where the 'soft sounds of ladybirds travelled through the stained glass'. (Who mentioned 'Pseud's Corner'...?) Audiophile material of the first order. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%



JS BACH

Brandenburg Concertos 1-6; Dunedin Consort/John Butt (192kHz/24-bit; FLAC/ALAC)

www.linnrecords.com; Linn Records CKD 430

The two hunting horns played by Anneke Scott and Joseph Walters make a glorious noise at the start of Concerto 1, and their duo 6m 25s in 1(v), is as clean as a whisker. Similarly, 4(iii) seemingly holds no terrors for trumpeter David Blackadder. (John Butt says in his comprehensive booklet note that their A' 392Hz pitch helps.) With one player per part this is one of the most stimulating sets of the *Brandenburgs* we have had; 3(iii) – introduced by an improvisatory violin passage – is lightning fast and the famous harpsichord cadenza in 5(i) is truly exciting (the more so as engineer Philip Hobbs maintains the continuo perspective balance). But the transverse flute's wailing wide trill, Concerto 5(i), 2m 47s-53s, did jar! And headphone listeners might detect a faint hum from the Perth Concert Hall as the music tracks start and stop. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%



TCHAIKOVSKY

The Manfred Symphony; Russian National Orchestra/Mikhail Pletnev (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

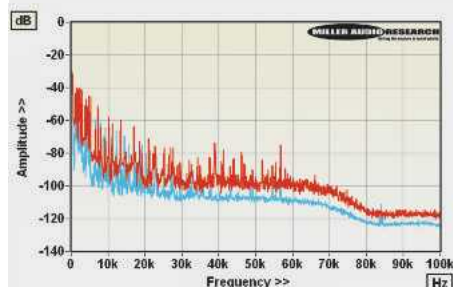
www.highresaudio.com; Pentatone PTC 5186387

Pletnev's first recording with the RNO, Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* [Virgin Classics, 1991] created a sensation. He went on to record a complete symphony cycle for Deutsche Grammophon, which included a 1993 *Manfred*, and currently a Pentatone cycle is under way. What's interesting is to find this new recording – made in a Moscow studio – has consistently longer timings, Pletnev adding 5m+ to his previous reading. It's the real score, not a cut 'n' paste some Russian conductors offer. But harmonium in the finale is replaced by a fulsome organ – dubbed in here from a Berlin church. (Only Markevitch followed the letter of the score here.) Superb clarity is helped by antiphonal violins and Mikhail Pletnev – none too quiet himself – gets very fine playing indeed from an orchestra that still, thanks to the winds, sounds very Russian. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%

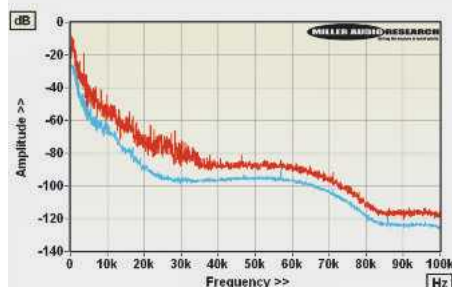


LAB REPORT



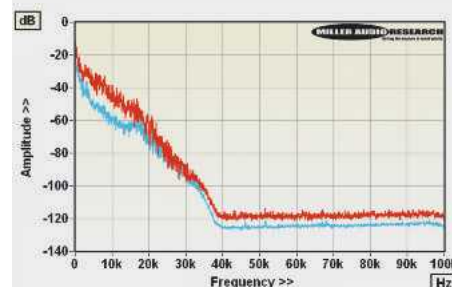
Few tracks occupy anything of the range offered by a 192kHz recording, but the gentle percussion from *Für Alina* clearly shows harmonics out to 60kHz! The noise floor varies by 10dB between tracks but remains very low throughout. **PM**

LAB REPORT



Available as a hybrid multichannel SACD and as downloads in resolutions from MP3 to 'Studio Master 192kHz', as tested here, this fabulous recording carries content consistent with an original rate of 96kHz with noise beyond ~45kHz. **PM**

LAB REPORT



Though a 96kHz file, the audio content is filtered slightly prematurely at ~40kHz with an ultrasonic 'bump' reminiscent of downsampled SACD (observed here by the high level content ending track 1). Good dynamics in the audioband. **PM**

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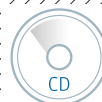
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DVD



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VINYL



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PINK FLOYD

The Division Bell (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.hi-resaudio.com; Warner Music Group 29326

This year marks the 20th anniversary of Pink Floyd's *The Division Bell*, the band's final studio album: released in March '94. It was largely met with critical disdain at the time, although this didn't prevent loyal Floyd followers hungry for *anything* new ensuring it went to the top of the album charts on both sides of the Atlantic. Whether you consider it a true Floyd work or, like 1987's *A Momentary Lapse Of Reason*, more a David Gilmour solo outing with contributions from Wright and Mason I'll leave you to decide. Meanwhile this HD download sounds really lovely, albeit only marginally more open and expressive than the original CD. Floyd fans unwilling to invest £110 in the commemorative deluxe box set (which includes a Blu-ray disc and 2LP 180g vinyl) edition remastered by Doug Sax) might consider this download an essential addition to their music library. *JB*

Sound Quality: 85%



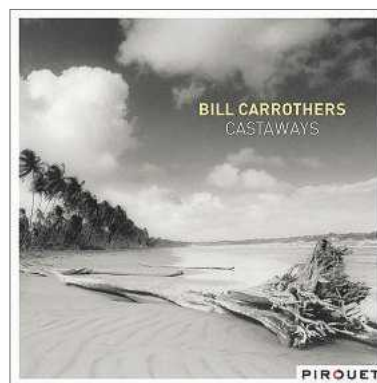
JUNE IN THE FIELDS

June In The Fields (192kHz/24-bit; FLAC/DSD64)

www.hi-resaudio.com; Fidelio FADC044

This collection of chilled-out country/folk songs by the curiously-named June In The Fields duo of composer Jean-Michel Renaud (guitar/vocal) and singer Mélissa Brouillette hails from Canada's Fidelio Musique label. Visit a hi-fi show in North America and you might bump into recording engineer René LaFlamme – who runs Fidelio Musique in Montreal – demonstrating his recordings promoted with the tag line: 'We capture the feeling...'. This is an intimate set, the duo accompanied on tracks such as 'Andaman Sea' and 'Summer Road' by Sebastien Saliceti on double-bass to flesh out the sparse arrangements. The vocals in particular have been beautifully captured by LaFlamme's all-tube mic and preamplifier set-up to produce a 'charming' sound that's exceedingly cosy and seductive, if a tad lacking air and space. A pleasing debut outing from this Canadian folk duo. *JB*

Sound Quality: 84%



BILL CARROTHERS

Castaways
(88.2kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

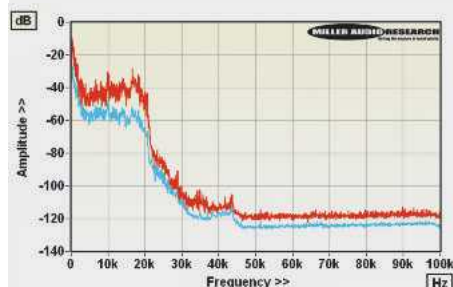
www.hi-resaudio.com; Pirouet PIT3067

The reclusive American pianist Bill Carrothers has recorded several albums for the Munich-based Pirouet label over the years. For *Castaways* he's accompanied by fellow American bass virtuoso Drew Gress and Belgian drummer Dré Pallemerts, the set first released on CD in 2012. Now the studio master can be enjoyed in its native 88.2kHz/24-bit format and it sounds beautifully balanced, the trio laid out in a sound image you can virtually walk into. Carrothers' talent has been hugely underrated other than by loyal followers. On *Castaways* his absorbing compositions once again meld hard and post-bop with occasional classical references, as in the track 'Siciliano', based on JS Bach's concerto movement, BWV1053. Meanwhile it's the contribution by bassist Gress that stands out – especially on the plaintive 'Araby'. *JB*

Sound Quality: 80%

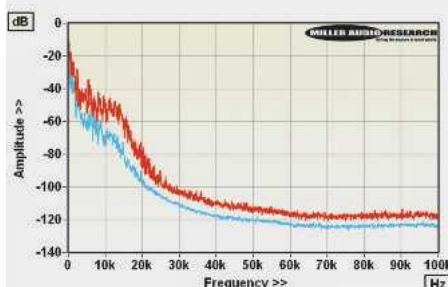


LAB REPORT



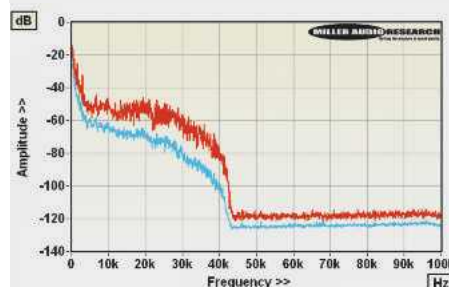
Recorded 20 years ago, *The Division Bell* is a mix of synthesised and analogue instrumentation. The latter is worthy of resampling at 96kHz but much of the former [Graph, trk 9] suggests the synths were operating at 44.1/48kHz. PM

LAB REPORT

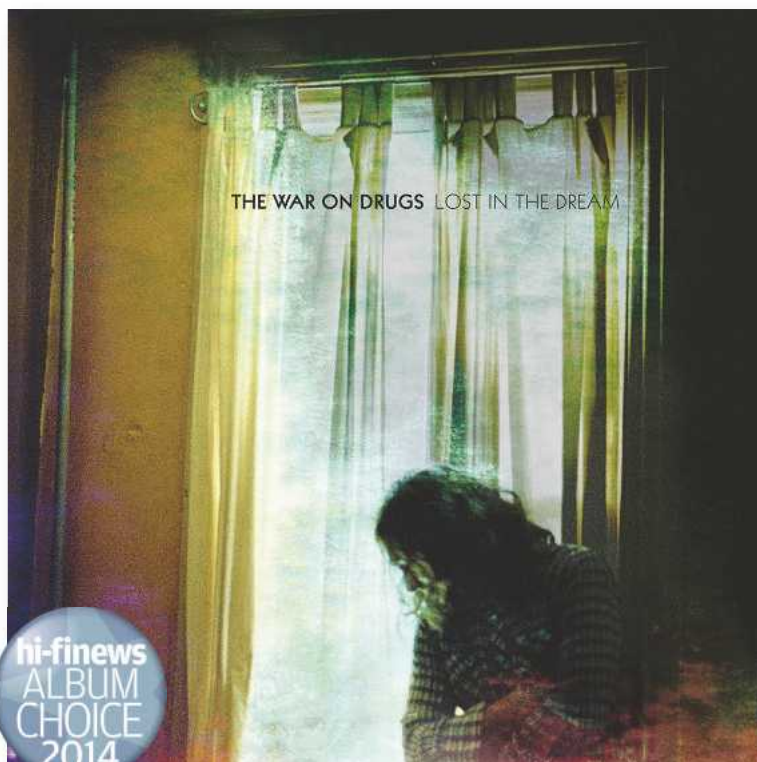


Recorded direct to analogue tape with no pitch correction or mixing, the bandwidth of this 192kHz/24-bit digitisation is necessarily slightly limited (a 96kHz transfer would have captured no less). But it's very pure indeed. PM

LAB REPORT



Pirouet's studio is impressive [www.pirouet.com/home/studio.php?page=6] and this 88.2kHz file was both recorded and mixed at the facility. Lower level tracks show some artefacts at ~32kHz but it's otherwise clean and dynamic. PM



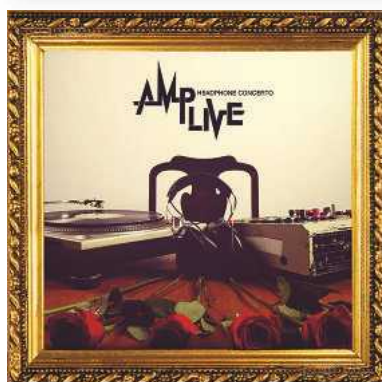
THE WAR ON DRUGS

Lost In The Dream

Secretly Canadian SC310

On the first two albums, Philadelphia's War On Drugs was largely just mainman Adam Granduciel, but since then he's played live so much that he's started to conceive his songs with his touring band in mind. As a result, *Lost In The Dream* displays the benefits and disadvantages of delegating elements of the sound to other musicians. The downside is that Granduciel's uniquely quirky take on songwriting is often submerged, but the organic sound of a working band gives this outing a fresh immediacy. The result, unexpectedly, often sounds like Bob Dylan backed by Dire Straits, but Granduciel is a smart enough composer to avoid mere pastiche. Rich in lyrical imagery, this is great stuff. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%



AMP LIVE

Headphone Concerto

Plug Research PLG 164

Ready for a challenge? Yes? This is for you. Right off, a tinkling music box is interrupted by an authoritarian spoken instruction suggesting the listener should 'Unlock your senses', followed by a glitchy synth-pop riff and a meandering cello. Yes, dude, we're in psychedelic-hip-hop-concept-prog crossover territory where, as enigmatic Californian DJ/producer/arranger Amp Live and his guests move things along, the vibes get very strange indeed. It's worth owning for high-points like the haunting 'Signs', the shiny pop tune 'Run Back', the mystical instrumental 'Remembrance' and the dance groove of 'Penny Nickel Dime'. Amp Live is, very probably, a genius. Trust me. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%



CIRCA ZERO

Circus Hero

429 Records FTN17981

It's great to hear former Police guitarist Andy Summers back in harness alongside an imaginative young songwriter. With an immaculate pedigree stretching back to the British rock 'n' roll scene of the mid-'60s, Summers remains among the most distinctive axe gods working today, and young upstart Rob Giles, best known as part of The Rescues, composes instantly memorable and singable rock-pop tunes ideally suited for decoration by Summers' trademark arpeggios and titanic, shimmering, splintered chords. Comparisons with The Police are inevitable, but ultimately these songs deserve to be heard by a new generation. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%



DAVIDGE

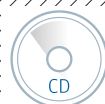
Slo Light

7Hz Productions 7HZCDR130006

If you've been paying any attention to British dance music for the past couple of decades, you'll know that Davidge is Neil Davidge, sonic wizard and co-writer of Massive Attack, whose collaborative credits also include David Bowie, Snoop Dogg and Primal Scream. This 11-track album (the 2LP set has five bonus tracks) offers some stand-out music, especially the swirly 'Gallant Foxes' featuring Cate Le Bon, the incandescently luminous 'That Fever' featuring Claire Tchaikowski, and the spooky trance-dance groove of 'Riot Pictures' featuring – I kid you not – Sandie Shaw. This is an outstanding sonic experience, with pin-sharp clarity. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%





COMPACT DISC



SUPRAAUDIO



DVD



BLU-RAY



VINYL



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TINA DICO

Whispers

Finest Gramophone Finest24DigP

Invited to compose a movie soundtrack, Danish singer-songwriter Tina Dico began exploring more intimate territory than before, so this album may be something of a shock to anyone familiar with her oeuvre. *Whispers* presents introspective, stripped-down confessional songs that could find favour with fans of Amy Mann or Suzanne Vega. Happily, her note-perfect vocals are still intact and, if anything, this is a more durable, more international, album than anything she's done to date, elevated beyond the norm by subtle arrangements and richly eclectic musical influences. Dico has turned a corner and now looks like a major songwriter for the future. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%



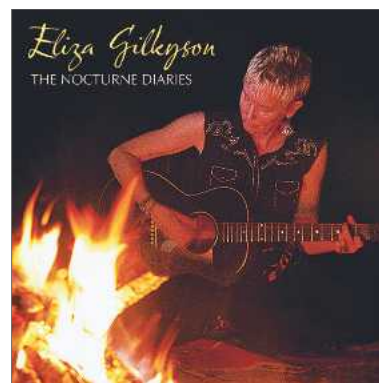
EGGS LAID BY TIGERS

Under The Mile Off Moon

ILK Records ILK197CD

I'm so glad I didn't realise that this Danish trio's exotically eccentric album consists entirely of musical settings of texts by Dylan Thomas when I started listening to it. You see, I hate those kinds of projects, so not knowing allowed me to hear it simply as quirky folk-pop rather than as pretentious twaddle. Even now that I know, I still love it. 'The Hand That Signed The Paper' sounds like Steely Dan reinvented as a cheesy 1950s pop band, 'Song' is imbued with an exquisite yearning and 'Let It Be Known' is gleefully uplifting. That three Danes can bring the visions of a drink-sodden Welsh wordsmith so gloriously back to life is as heartening as it is unlikely. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%



ELIZA GILKYSON

The Nocturne Diaries

Red House Records RHR264

The Texas based singer-songwriter Eliza Gilkyson released her first album *Eliza* in '69 at the tender age of 19, and although she hasn't yet set the world alight, her jumbo-sized discography is ripe for rediscovery. This, her 21st album by my reckoning might be the key that could unlock the door to her back-catalogue, because she's in fine form. As its title suggests, this is a dark-hued collection of songs but, although often introspective, it's never depressing. Gilkyson's intimate, confidential voice invites and welcomes you in to her world of broken American dreams, train songs and late night musings on life and love. Happily, dawn never seems too far distant. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%



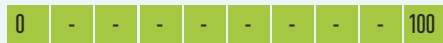
BABE

Volery Flighty

Moshi Moshi Records MOSHILP55

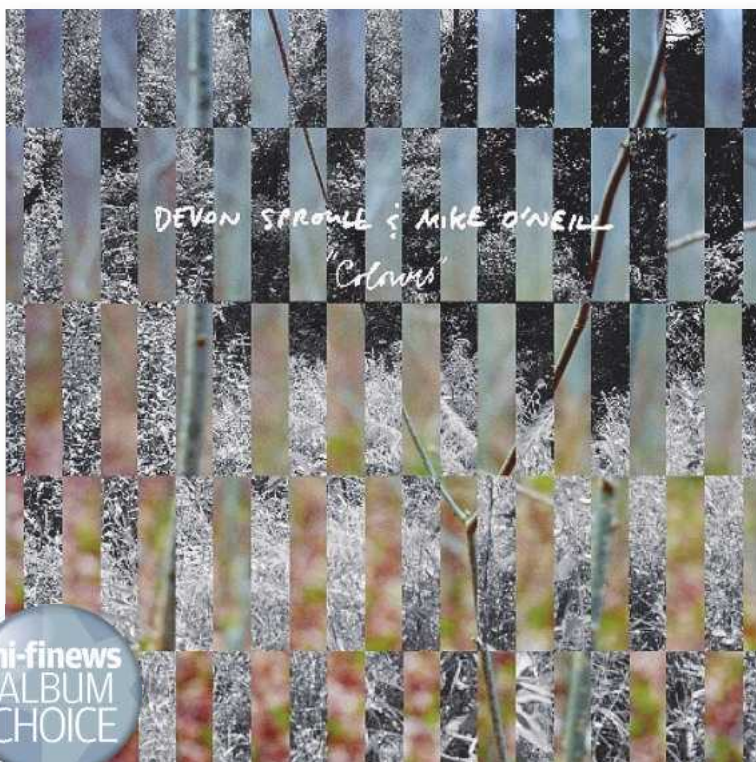
This is the most startlingly beautiful album I've heard in yonks but, frustratingly, it's so individual that it's hard to find a category that comes close to describing it. The musicians involved seem to be mainly Gerard Black and Amaury Ranger. Black was formerly of Glasgow's electropop quartet Findo Gask but is now with enigmatic French ensemble François And The Atlas Mountains, as is Ranger. The songs often consist of inscrutably repeated phrases, set to achingly beautiful melodies against minimalist cheesy keyboard lines, sometimes underpinned by experimental trip-hoppy beats. Black's lovely falsetto gives many tracks a curiously celestial atmosphere. Easy listening it's not. Head-scratchingly stimulating it is. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%



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ALBUM
CHOICE

BABE
VOLERY FLIGHTY



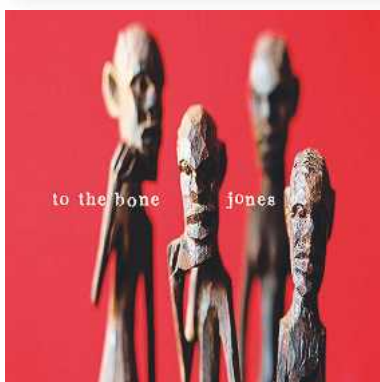
DEVON SPROULE AND MIKE O'NEILL

Colours

Tin Angel Records TAR038

I've been banging on about Devon Sproule for so long that I'm starting to wonder if she's destined to remain an acquired taste. If that's the case, it's not too late to acquire it, because her latest offering (this is her fourth Tin Angel album), a collaboration with Canadian songwriter Mike O'Neill, features some of her most gorgeous music to date. The way their voices intertwine on 'Magic In The Panic' is breathtaking, and set against one of the most lovely electronic/orchestral backings I've heard in ages. O'Neill seems to have encouraged Sproule to take a more straightforward rhythmic approach to recording, which enhances her melodies and vocal timbre enormously. Don't wait: buy this today. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%



JONES

To The Bone

MeMe Records CDM18

Many will know Trevor Jones in his incarnation as Miracle Mile, easily Britain's most singer-songwriterly duo. Occasionally he releases a 'solo' album, but how these differ from Miracle Mile albums is hard to define. A Jones album is perhaps more minimal, less complex, than a Miracle Mile one, with the balance between the contributions of Jones and his multi-instrumentalist partner Marcus Cliffe skewed more towards Jones. This is another corker with gorgeous ambient touches: the distant police sirens in 'Books To Bed', the steel guitar that morphs into an angel choir on the short, sweet, 'Man Behind The Moon'. Possibly his best yet. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%



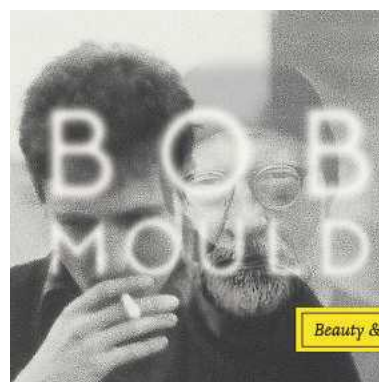
WILL LEE

Love, Gratitude And Other Distractions

Moosicus M 1211-2

I was prepared to hate this from the moment I saw the CD sticker boasting the presence of smooth Los Angeles studio players including Steve Lukather, Bob James and Steve Gadd. Then I noticed that the legendary Allen Toussaint was also present, along with ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons. Hmmm, maybe worth a listen? Will Lee, it turns out, is a bassist best-known for his years in the CBS Orchestra on *The Late Show With David Letterman* but, as it happens, he's no slouch as a songwriter and has a gritty growl of a voice that does more than justice to Toussaint's 1966 classic 'Get Out Of My Life Woman'. Go on, give *Love, Gratitude* a go! You could be pleasantly surprised. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%



BOB MOULD

Beauty And Ruin

Merge MRG 520

After redefining the power trio in the '80s and '90s with the influential bands Hüsker Dü and Sugar, latterly Bob Mould was drawn to DJing and dance music, but he's back working in that format, purveying finely crafted pop songs bolstered by a formidable rhythm section. Jon Wurster's drums and Jason Narducy's bass have a live, organic feel, and it's an exciting group sound. But Mould's guitar remains the most thrilling component, a vast roar full of drones and overtones. The album's dynamic range is wide, from the breezy 'Let The Beauty Be' to the high velocity guitar firestorms of 'Hey Mr Grey' and 'Little Glass Pill'. It stands up with his best work. *MB*

Sound Quality: 90%





COMPACT DISC



SUPRAAUDIO



DVD



BLU-RAY



VINYL



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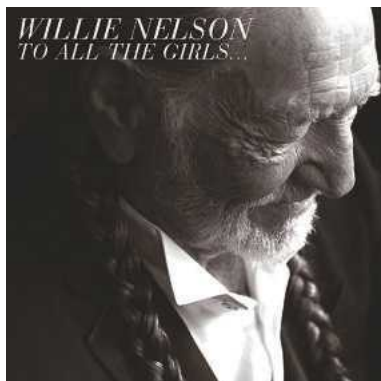
MONA AND MARIA

My Sun

Jansen Plateproduksjon JANSEN 026

The Nordic nations are continuing to produce some of the most compelling, captivating and intelligent pop music of today. Mona Andersen and Maria Knudsen are a pair of singer-songwriters from Oslo who grew dissatisfied with the music being made by their former band, Bazooka Boppers, and set about exploring the possibilities of summery folk-pop powered by close harmony vocals and an eclectic choice of instruments both acoustic and electric. The backwards synths, unsettling orchestrations, silvery sitars and skin-shiveringly beautiful vocals of 'Venus' are typical of the sonic treats scattered throughout this astounding debut. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%



WILLIE NELSON

To All The Girls...

Sony Legacy LC 12723

As usual, the indefatigable Willie Nelson is defying all the rules. In his 81st year, the dope-smoking country rebel should be well past his peak, but that wobbly old paper-thin voice sounds as sincerely heartfelt as ever. Pairing this old codger with young women whose backgrounds lie in jazz, folk, r'n'b and rock should be disastrous but instead, it's a triumph. His Sheryl Crow duet on the standard 'Faraway Places' could have stumbled on so many hurdles... Could Crow even approximate the delicate jazz suss needed? The answer is 100% yes, as it is with almost every unlikely pairing, from Norah Jones to Shelby Lynne and Mavis Staples on this immaculate release. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%



MATT SCHOFIELD

Far As I Can See

Provogue PRD 416

For those who like their music uncomplicated and with a spoonful of grit, Matt Schofield dishes up an eighth album which confirms what the cognoscenti have known for several years: that he is probably the most convincing blues axemeister of the era. Not only can he write songs that step a little further outside the genre than most, he has a good singing (not just shouting) voice, and his playing has a finesse and tonal definition that few of his competitors come close to. The occasional lapse into clichés onto cuts like 'Clean Break' are more than balanced out with the imaginative title track and a gorgeous cover of The Neville Brothers' 'Yellow Moon'. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%



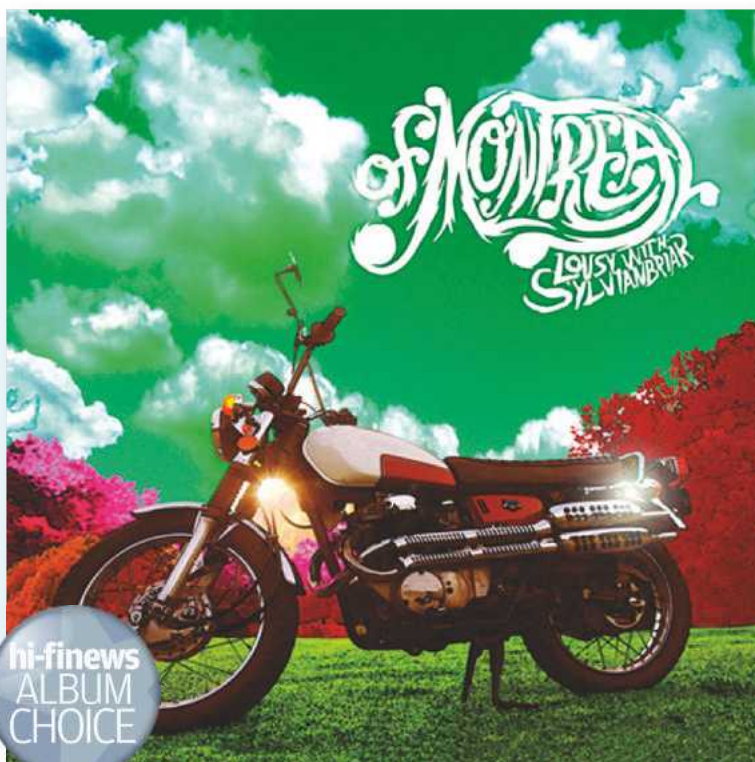
OF MONTREAL

Lousy With Sylvian Briar

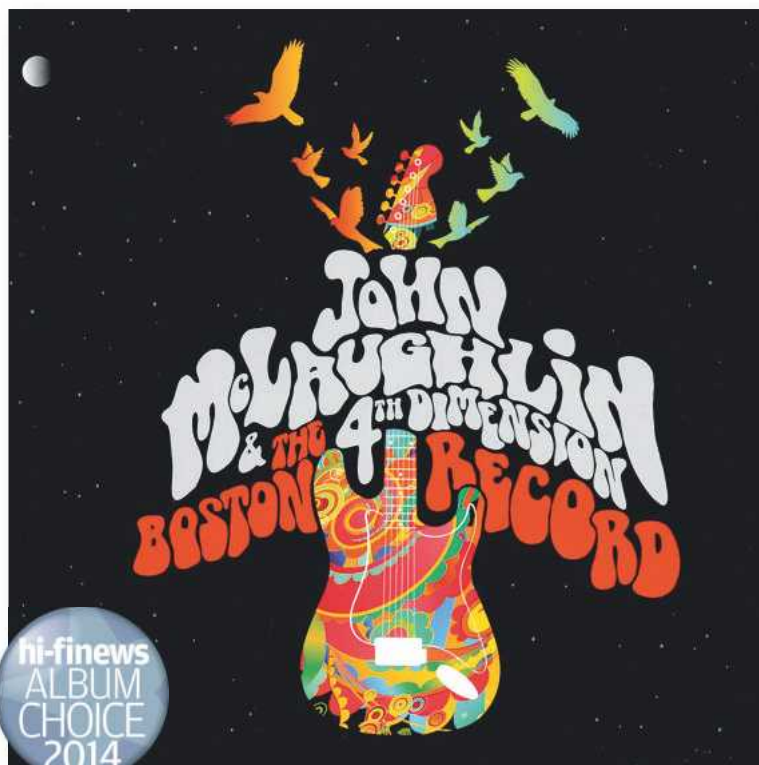
Polyvinyl Record Company PRC-268

Trust Kevin Barnes, the creative core of Of Montreal (from Athens, Georgia), to find a way to move forward by retreating into the past. I really can't be bothered with artists who slavishly attempt to recreate the sounds of days gone by, but Barnes has done something quite different. These tracks don't sound like any particular iconic band of the late '60s but they ingeniously channel the spirit of combining unusual sounds and textures with hummable melodies and naggingly addictive little licks. Recording at home on a 24-track tape machine, Barnes has made an album of unusual intimacy, immediacy and verve. Simpler than any previous Of Montreal recordings, this is the hookiest album I've heard in ages. Sheer magic. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%



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ALBUM
CHOICE



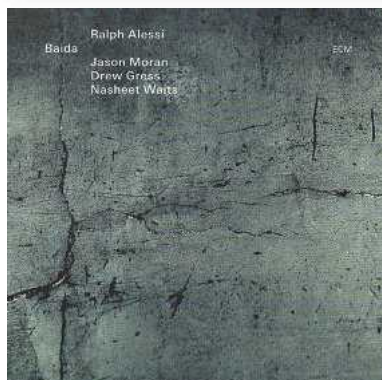
JOHN McLAUGHLIN & THE 4TH DIMENSION

The Boston Record

Abstract Logix ABLX042

Along with McLaughlin's still-astounding guitar wizardry, this live album is a showcase for the virtuosity of silk-gloved bass player Etienne M'Bappe and the amazing drumming of Ranjit Barot. And there are real pyrotechnics when he's joined on another set of drums by keyboardist Gary Husband, a mainstay of McLaughlin's groups since 2005. There's a kind of celebratory feel to the whole thing, whether it's the funky 'Abbaji' from the 2008 *Floating Point* album or the more contemplative 'Senor CS' from *Industrial Zen*. Delving further back, the set ends with a crowd-pleasing, anthemic version of the Mahavishnu Orchestra's 'You Know You Know'. McLaughlin certainly knows how to keep that fusion flag flying. **SH**

Sound Quality: 90%



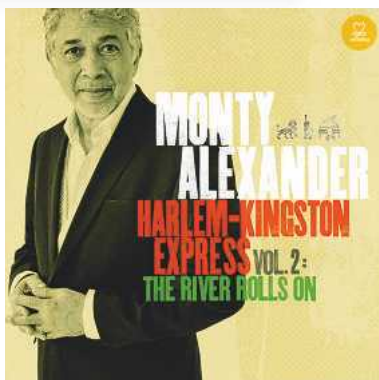
RALPH ALESSI

Baida

ECM 3725304

For his ECM debut, the virtuoso trumpeter reconvened a quartet that first appeared on some tracks of his 2002 album *This Against That* and on all of *Cognitive Dissonance* in 2010. He'd worked before with bassist Drew Gress and drummer Nasheet Waits, but the final link was pianist Jason Moran who, Alessi says, knew how to orchestrate his compositions 'in an improvised way'. Recorded at Avatar Studios in New York, this is music of astonishing rhythmic precision, yet with a sense of ease and completeness, helped by a gorgeous, glossy studio sound that's as beguiling as Alessi's constantly surprising melodies. It just gets more accessible each time you listen. **SH**

Sound Quality: 85%



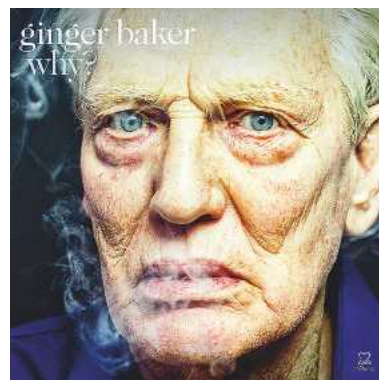
MONTY ALEXANDER

Harlem-Kingston Express Vol 2: The River Rolls On

Motéma 233828

Though he's lived in the USA since 1961, Alexander has always celebrated his roots in Jamaica where, as a teenager, he'd played sessions for the top producers. His Harlem-Kingston Express combines the jazz piano trio with a Jamaican rhythm section, and when their 2011 New York concert recording (originally made for Sirius XM radio) was released on Motéma, it was a huge hit. *Vol 2*'s ten studio tracks still have the gutsy, real-thing feel of the live album, and there's an all-star interlude as George Benson, Ramsey Lewis and Joe Sample join the band on Alexander's catchy 'Love Notes'. Finally, three tracks from the original live sessions make an enjoyable bonus. **SH**

Sound Quality: 85%



GINGER BAKER

Why?

Motéma 233846

His first recording for eight years features Baker's touring quartet Jazz Confusion, with Alec Dankworth on bass, African percussionist Abass Doodoo and saxophonist Pee Wee Ellis. In the late '60s, while Baker was powering Cream, Ellis was touring with James Brown and, today, their work together reflects Baker's immersion in African music. Along with many originals there's a traditional Nigerian song and a diversion to the Virgin Islands by way of 'St Thomas' (made famous by Sonny Rollins). The cover image seems to reflect the 2012 documentary *Beware Of Mr Baker*, and when you hear 'Why?', you'll know that he doesn't just *look* scary: he *is* scary. **SH**

Sound Quality: 90%





COMPACT DISC



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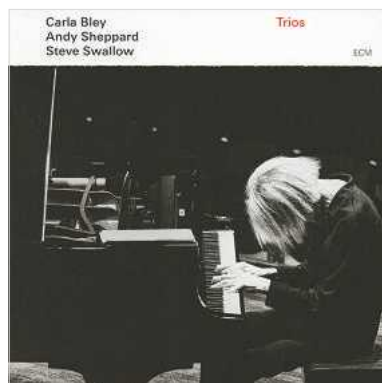
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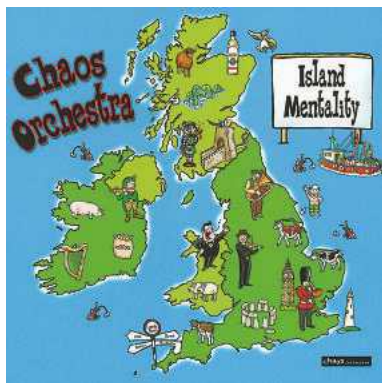
CARLA BLEY, ANDY SHEPPARD, STEVE SWALLOW

Trios

ECM 372 4551

Here Carla Bley's long-established trio revisits favourite pieces from her four decades as a jazz composer. Bley's music has appeared on the ECM-distributed WATT label since 1973, but this is the first time she has recorded for ECM, with label boss Manfred Eicher as producer. And surely the trio's empathy and depth of expression have never been better captured. With Bley's beautifully clear-minded compositions and undimmed pianism, Swallow's effortless shifts from accompanist to melodist, and Sheppard's saxophone as communicative as a human voice, this is flawless music. Quintessential ECM too. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



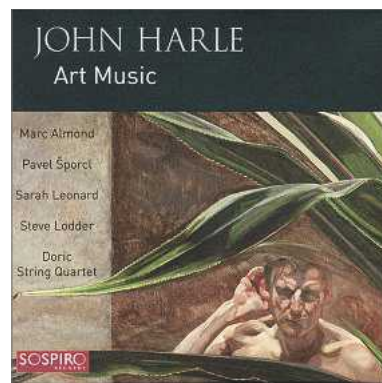
CHAOS ORCHESTRA

Island Mentality

Chaos Collective CC002

Set up by trumpeter Laura Jurd and two members of her quartet, Corrie Dick and Elliot Galvin, Chaos Collective aims to create opportunities for like-minded musicians; its first release was the quartet's *Landing Ground*. Here Jurd is directing the 20-piece Chaos Orchestra, while the album's co-producer is Mark Lockheart, veteran of '80s big band phenomenon Loose Tubes. He also wrote one of the eight pieces here, as did guitarist Alex Roth, but the rest come from Jurd and from Simon Marsh, leader of the five-man sax section. With Loose Tubes' 30th anniversary reunion last May, comparisons are inevitable. But you must hear this brilliant debut. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



JOHN HARLE

Art Music

Sospira SOSIH100213

It was John Harle's work on BBC2's *Lucian Freud - Painted Life* that led to this concept album. Starting with Freud, he responds in music to the work of several British artists, helped by Marc Almond, Sarah Leonard and the Doric Quartet. Francis Bacon's *Study after Velasquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* becomes a sound collage that swirls frighteningly down to eternal darkness and, more cheerfully, minimalist-ish rhythms wake up the woods in response to David Hockney's *The Arrival Of Spring*. Finally, inspired by a John Craxton painting, *Arcadia* draws on Cretan folk music and this is brilliantly performed by Harle, Steve Lodder and Pavel Sporcl. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



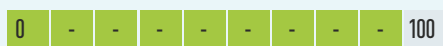
FRENCH NEW WAVE

Digitally Remastered Jazz On Film Recordings 1957-62

Jazz On Film JOF 001 (mono; five discs)

Miles Davis's haunting, echoey muted trumpet on *Lift To The Scaffold* remained a touchstone for countless imitators long after Miles had moved on. This superbly-researched box set puts that iconic soundtrack in context, kicking off with the first film score ever written by a serious jazz composer, John Lewis's *Sun In Venice*, and going on to the Jazz Messengers' music for *Les Femmes Disparaissent* and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. You also get Martial Solal's *Breathless*, along with a less well-known gem, the music for *Un Témoin Dans La Ville* by Barney Wilen, the great French sax player with Miles on *Lift To The Scaffold*. All in mono of course, but excellently remastered, an enticing entree to a fascinating story. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%



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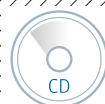
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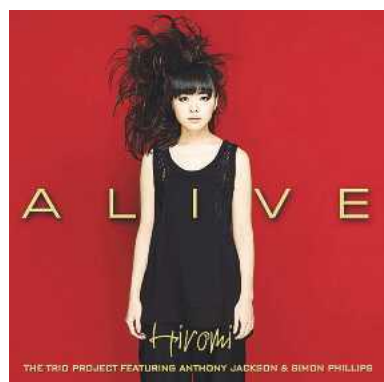
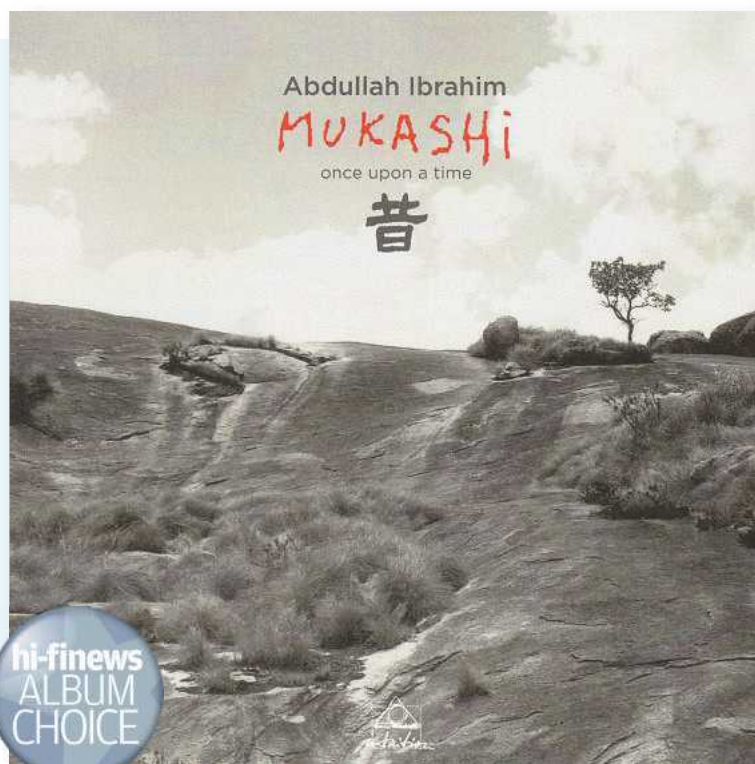
ABDULLAH IBRAHIM

Mukashi: Once Upon A Time

Intuition INT 3431 2

Leaving South Africa in 1962, the pianist embarked on an astonishing career that saw him returning to play at Mandela's inauguration in 1994, then continuing to lead Ekaya, the group he'd formed in 1983. This time, though you don't get the dancing rhythms and beautiful, often Ellingtonian, horn ensemble colours of Ekaya, you do get a wonderful partnership with that group's long-time reeds player Cleave Guyton. Ibrahim also plays flute, as he's done occasionally over the years, and to add further textures he's brought in cellists Eugen Bazijan and Scott Roller. It would be facile to call this music 'haunting', although some of it is, because it's so much deeper and wiser and calmer than that. **SH**

Sound Quality: 90%



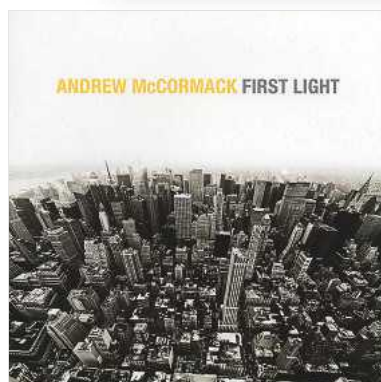
HIROMI

Alive

Telarc TEL-5307-02 (also available as Limited Edition SHM-CD + DVD)

Hiromi's nine albums to date include a couple with her electric group Sonicbloom, one of duets with Chick Corea and one with the Stanley Clarke Band. But this is her third release with The Trio Project, featuring the bassist Anthony Jackson and drummer Simon Phillips. Hiromi says 'The more I play with them, the more ideas I have for songwriting' – and her compositions here are themed on different aspects of 'being alive'. So 'Wanderer' opens with a vision of new horizons and then explores restlessly, while 'Seeker' is a gospel-hued tune that builds in inimitable Hiromi fashion. The pianist has created an enduring supergroup and this is their best work yet. **SH**

Sound Quality: 90%



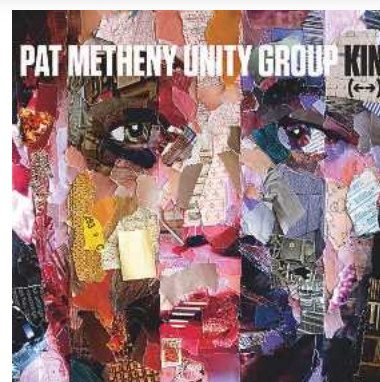
ANDREW McCORMACK

First Light

Edition Records EDN1052

After his ear-catching 2007 debut, *Telescope*, pianist McCormack followed through with a couple of fine albums in a duo with saxophonist Jason Yarde and also the trio set *Live In London*. Now based in New York, he's accompanied here by Americans Zak Lober on bass and Colin Stranahan on drums. All but one of the nine numbers are McCormack originals, the beautiful title track building up softly like the dawn itself, and all these compositions combine his never-failing, long-lined melodic invention with a strong structural logic and a solid emotional centre. Finally, he plays Monk's 'Pannonica' with a convincing new rhythmic twist. **SH**

Sound Quality: 90%



PAT METHENY UNITY GROUP

Kin (<->)

Nonesuch 536354 (CD and 2LP set on 140g vinyl)

It was more than 30 years on from *80/81* before Metheny again recorded with a featured sax player, winning his 20th Grammy for the 2012 *Unity Band* quartet album. The outstanding sax was Chris Potter, joined by powerhouse drummer Antonio Sanchez and superb young bassist Ben Williams. Now Metheny, no mean one-man-band himself, has added amazing multi-instrumentalist Giulio Carmassi, on keyboards and horns. He likens this to going from black and white to Technicolor. A track like 'Sign Of The Season' becomes majestic, its marching beat as inexorable as the waves of the sea, while the long-lined title track that follows just builds and builds. **SH**

Sound Quality: 85%



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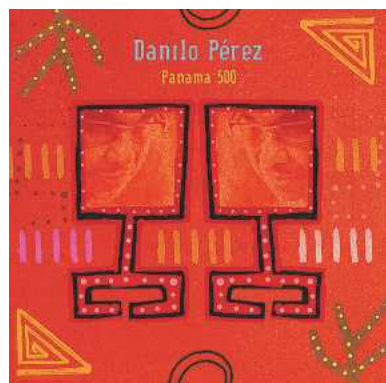
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DANILO PÉREZ

Panama 500

Mack Avenue MAC1075

Though the title refers to Balbao's arrival in 1513, the Panamanian-born pianist's musical exposition of his country's history starts with the culture of the indigenous Guna people. We hear Pérez with colleagues from the Wayne Shorter Qt, bass player John Patitucci and drummer Brian Blade, but many other musicians are involved. There are lyrical contributions from violin and cello, Panamanian percussion from Milagros Blades and Ricaurte Villareal, and a group of Guna musicians who provide percussion, chants and narrations. This dramatic opus will take hold of you, striking home with passion, virtuosity and commitment. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



ALFREDO RODRIGUEZ

The Invasion Parade

Mack Avenue MAC1079

Discovered by Quincy Jones, the brilliant young Cuban pianist arrived in the USA in 2009 and made his first album appearance with *Sounds Of Space* in 2012. This time he's taken a look back to his homeland, the exuberant title track conjuring up the annual celebration of the liberating invasion that brought independence from Spain in 1898. Rodríguez's supple, energetic pianism is matched by a fine rhythm section and the saxes of Roman Filiu and Billy Carron, while Esperanza Spalding adds a joyously sparkling vocal on 'El Güije'. There's a sophisticated update of 'Guantanamera' and a movingly melancholic 'Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps'. A great album. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



HELEN SUNG

Anthem For A New Day

Concord Jazz CJA-34496

Leading an impressive sextet that includes trumpeter Ingrid Jansen and tenor saxist Seamus Blake, Sung makes her Concord debut with a judicious mix of jazz standards and originals. There's a gritty 'Epistrophy' and a foot-tapping 'Armando's Rhumba' (with Paquito D'Rivera), and a tongue-in-cheek 'It Don't Mean A Thing'. Sung's originals range from the frenetic 'Chaos Theory' to a deeply ruminative 'Hidden', with violinist Regina Carter. For Sung, who graduated as a classical pianist before switching to jazz, this *New Day* is about finally taking her place in the jazz world, wedding passion and swing to immaculate technique and musical intelligence. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



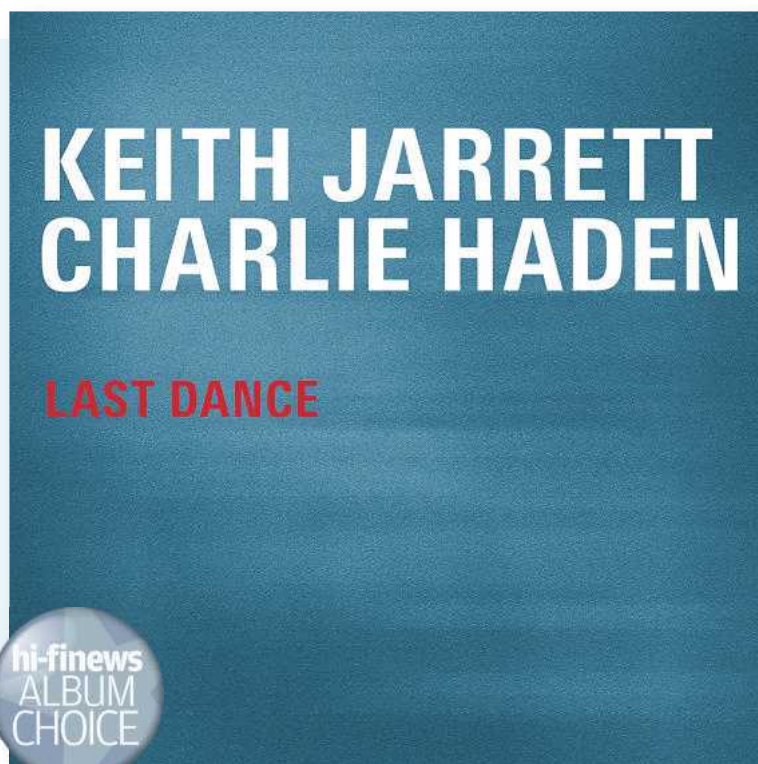
KEITH JARRETT AND CHARLIE HADEN

Last Dance

ECM 378 0524

The title of this album is sadly apposite, as Charlie Haden passed away in July. Back in 2007, when they hadn't worked together for 30 years, pianist and bassist met during the making of a film about Haden, and Jarrett invited him to his home studio. They spent four days recording, and some of the results were heard on the album *Jasmine*. In this collection, tunes include the jazz standards 'Dance Of The Infidels' by Bud Powell and Monk's 'Round Midnight' as well as ballads like 'My Old Flame'. With this second album celebrating that same reunion, you'll think that you're in for more of the same, and it's true. But this duo had defined a genre of their own – one that you couldn't have too much of. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



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BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonatas 28-32, Opp. 101-111

Igor Levit

Sony 8837 03872

Although this is his Sony debut there's not a word about the pianist (born in Gorky but brought up in Germany) in the booklet. But there's ample to be found online – even footage at the Berlin Siemensvilla sessions last spring. Igor Levit is an extraordinary musician who plays with the fluency of Walter Gieseking (but with far greater musical penetration) and whose late Beethoven can withstand any amount of comparison with previous masters. Constantly one is drawn in wonderment at passing details, although everything is structured with inevitability and the sound is always beautiful – never harsh (as in Pollini's DG set). Showiness is utterly foreign to Levit. **CB**

Sound Quality: 95%



BARTÓK

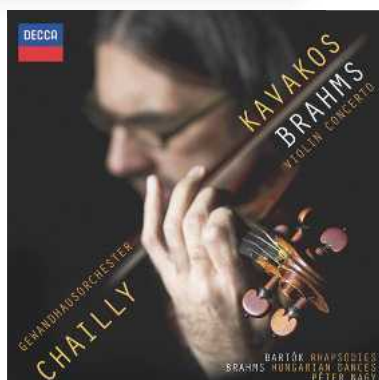
Violin Concertos 1 and 2

Isabelle Faust, Swedish RSO/Daniel Harding

Harmonia Mundi HMC 902146

Isabelle Faust is, along with Gidon Kremer, perhaps the most musically perceptive violinist we've had since Menuhin. She began recording for Harmonia Mundi with the Bartók sonatas and this new concerto coupling has been meticulously researched by Faust, who is completely attuned to the idiom. The early, oddly structured First Concerto reveals Bartók at his most vulnerable (first movement); the contrasting *giocoso* finale is a wonderfully complex and unusual piece. In the Second Concerto she opts for the original, less showy ending. Both scores are finely conducted too, although the tuttis sound a little cloudy. **CB**

Sound Quality: 88%



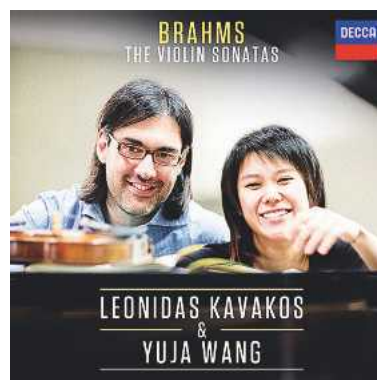
BRAHMS/BARTÓK

Violin Concerto; Hungarian Dances/Rhapsodies 1, 2
Leonidas Kavakos, Péter Nagy, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orch/
Riccardo Chailly

Decca 478 5432; downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit

After Batiashvili and Faust, who both opted for Busoni's cadenza in (i) it's good to have the Joachim rightfully reinstated here in this rich and powerful account of Brahms' concerto. Kavakos has the technical and musical grasp of this great work and (as part of his Leipzig Brahms exploration) Chailly unearths effective detail. But there are no tricks, no attempts to be 'different'. The two Bartók *Rhapsodies* follow (to reflect a genuine Hungarian ethos) then four of Brahms's *Dances* are given in violin/piano transcription. A top recommendation, with splendid Decca sound. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%



BRAHMS

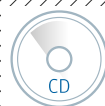
Violin Sonatas 1-3; (FAE) Scherzo; Wiegenlied
Leonidas Kavakos/Yuja Wang

Decca 478 6442; downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit

These young soloists first played the Brahms violin sonatas at last year's Verbier Festival, then later in Europe, before recording them in the Hamburg Friedrich-Ebert-Halle last December. It's a partnership that works well, with give and take – although I still find the sound Yuja Wang makes a little shallow for this composer. 'She's too loud' a friend complained at one point, when listening to the CD. But the 96kHz/24-bit download [highresaudio.com] tells a different story: tonal qualities are enhanced and you can hear it's a well balanced studio mix from close mic sources. The transcribed lullaby makes a restful bonus. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%





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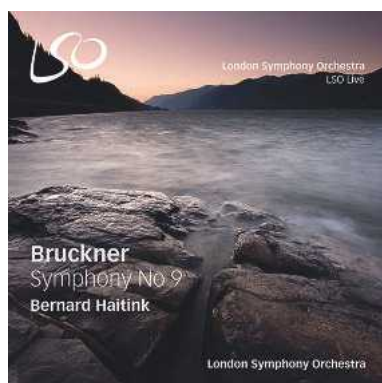
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BRUCKNER

Symphony 9
LSO/Bernard Haitink

LSO Live LSO 0746 (SACD hybrid); downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit

When he was a younger man, Haitink's Bruckner performances were shorter: his 1965 Concertgebouw Ninth times at 59m 24s, this one, taken from two 2013 Barbican concerts (when he was 84), spans 67m 10s. Not that you feel it's unduly slow: it's too engrossing for that. So much detail emerges from the composer's big canvas; at the same time the abrupt shifts in mood and pace make perfect sense – although the contrasting trio section sounds almost frolicsome in the context of Bruckner's pugnacious scherzo! The playing of the LSO is wholly admirable – a very fine Ninth, sobering in overall effect. **CB**

Sound Quality: 85%



CHOPIN

5 Nocturnes; Impromptus; Piano Sonata 3
Louis Lortie

Chandos CHAN 10813; downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit

In this magnificent recital, Vol.3 in his Chandos series, Louis Lortie alternates the Impromptus with Nocturnes in a key-related sequence, then we have the B minor Sonata (not the 'Funeral March' one). His Chopin is direct, strong but sensitive – it put me in mind of Solomon's [Testament SBT1030] – with none of the mannered playing found with some of today's younger pianists. You only have to listen to that most popular of the Nocturnes, Op.9 No.3, to appreciate Lortie's thoughtful approach. Additionally, at least in 96kHz/24-bit resolution, the sound from Potton Hall is exceptionally fine – Lortie plays a Fazioli grand. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%



ELGAR/DVORAK/TCHAIKOVSKY

Cello Concerto/Rondo; Silent Woods/Rococo Variations (Ed. Fitzhagen)
Jean-Guihen Queyras, BBC SO/Jiri Belohlavek

Harmonia Mundi HMC 902148

We've had memorable recordings of the Elgar by French cellists: Tortelier; Navarra. Now here's a third: Queyras plays with complete empathy and consummate technique. Yet for some his playing will seem too self-contained. The BBC SO gives excellent support and the orchestra is especially fine in the balletic Tchaikovsky variations after the cadenza. But it's a shame that cellists (Isserlis a lonely exception) still play the Fitzenhagen version. Dvorak's homely pieces are sandwiched between these works. Excellent sound from BBC Maida Vale Studios. **CB**

Sound Quality: 95%



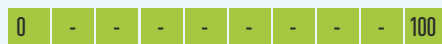
BEETHOVEN

String Trio Op.3; Serenade Op.8
Trio Zimmermann

BIS BIS2087 (SACD hybrid); downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit

You don't put three soloists together for the finest chamber-music performances, reviews in the old *EMG Monthly Letter* often argued. And with the Beethoven string trios you might 'prove' the case with the Trio Italiano D'Archi vs Mutter/Giuranna/Rostropovich recordings (both DG). But as we saw with Vol.1 [*HFN* Apr '12, p89] Frank Peter Zimmermann, Antoine Tamesit and Christian Poltéra play – and think – as one. The fourth movement of the *Serenade* ought (as Alfred Brendel would say) to make you laugh, with its abrupt *adagio-allegro molto* alternations. Wonderfully clean balances in these early summer 2013 Stockholm Musikaliska recordings. **CB**

Sound Quality: 95%





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BERLIOZ

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DVOŘÁK Cello Concertos

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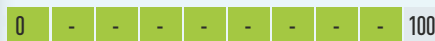
DVOŘÁK

Cello Concerto Op.104, etc
Steven Isserlis, Mahler Chamber Orch/Daniel Harding

Hyperion CDA67917; 96kHz/24-bit download

Steven Isserlis has waited until he was 54 to record Dvořák's great Cello Concerto, and here he adds the earlier, unorchestrated one from 1865 (in a free edition by Günther Raphael), which he says 'bubbles with joy'. An appendix contains the original ending to the main work and an orchestral transcription of the song quoted by Dvořák, 'Lasst mich allein'. The solo performance is unsurprisingly fervent, and Daniel Harding gives an inspiring accompaniment – a true meeting of minds – while the recordings from the Teatro Comunale di Ferrara have a powerful presence. The enthusiastic booklet note (with timing references) is by Isserlis himself. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%



ELGAR

Symphony 2
Berlin Staatskapelle/Daniel Barenboim

Decca 478 6677

It was Barbirolli who encouraged the young Daniel Barenboim to explore Elgar's music, and he first recorded this symphony with the LPO in 1972 for CBS, along with much else. Timings haven't changed markedly but this live recording is of a matured reading, quite bristly in the scherzo, and full of energy from the start. Now an 'elder statesman' (politically as well as musically) Barenboim gives us the public face of Elgar and the counterbalancing withdrawal and sadness. The orchestral balance is telling – solo oboe clearly focused in the slow movement, for example. A different view from Boult's but equally unmissable. **CB**

Sound Quality: 85%



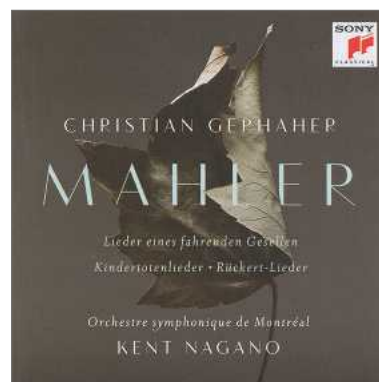
DEBUSSY/MAHLER

L'après-midi d'un faune/Symphony 4
RAM Soloists Ensemble/Trevor Pinnock

Linn CKD 438 (SACD hybrid; downloads up to 192kHz/24-bit)

These are chamber music reductions prepared by Schoenberg pupils for a private music performance society in Vienna. The Mahler (arranged by Erwin Stein) has 14 players, with piano and harmonium prominent. I don't feel that the music itself is really illuminated by these transcriptions: the performances (recorded at St George's, Brandon Hill, Bristol) are just enjoyable in their own right. Highlights are the flute playing of Mi Re Seo in the Debussy and soprano Sónia Grané in the Mahler finale. And of course it is interesting to hear Trevor Pinnock, whom we associate with much earlier composers, directing Mahler. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%



MAHLER

Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen;
Kindertotenlieder; 5 Rückert Lieder
Christian Gerhaher, Montréal SO/Kent Nagano

Sony 88837 01332

Christian Gerhaher is such an expressive singer – always putting word meaning ahead of just vocal sound quality – that his parts in the two orchestral song-cycles and five settings of poems by Rückert can almost be taken for granted. What makes this Sony issue so satisfying lies in the orchestral accompaniments provided by the Montreal orchestra; thus on one disc we have interpretations to complement those of Fischer-Dieskau (variously with Kempe/EMI, Kubelík/DG and Böhm/DG). One or two audience noises confirm that these Jan '12 Sony recordings were indeed live. **CB**

Sound Quality: 90%



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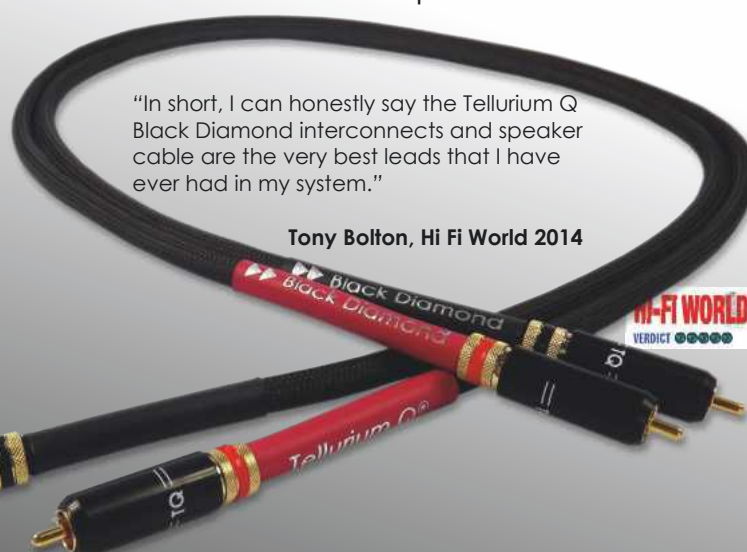
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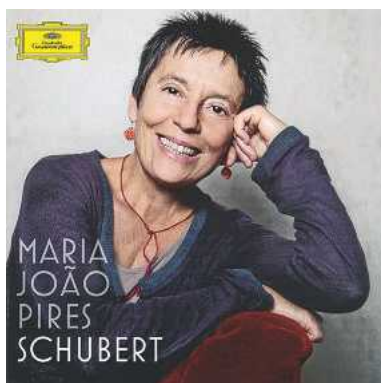
MOZART

Piano Concertos K466 and K503
Martha Argerich, Orchestra Mozart/Claudio Abbado

DG 479 1033

Argerich and Abbado first recorded piano concertos for DG in 1967 – sadly, these live recordings from the 2013 Lucerne Festival must be their last collaboration. The D-minor Concerto (K466) is especially fine and the Beethoven cadenzas make you wonder ‘isn’t this how *he* might have sounded?’. In K503 we hear a cadenza by Argerich’s one-time mentor Friedrich Gulda. She gives very much her own view of Mozart, and in the festive C major (K503) I admit to straining not to miss any strands of what Claudio Abbado and his Bologna orchestra were doing. You can hear Pires with Abbado in K466: DG 479 0075. *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%



SCHUBERT

Piano Sonatas in A minor, D845; in B flat, D960
Maria João Pires

DG 477 8107

Long pauses follow those rumbling bass trills in the opening movement of Schubert’s last sonata, and pauses are a salient feature of Pires’ exhaustive and highly individual reading. Does she over-complicate these two works? Possibly, as every detail has its own colouring and dynamic – yet it’s playing which any pianophile will want to hear (beautifully engineered too, from Hamburg’s Friedrich-Ebert-Halle back in mid-2011). Pires’ D960, then, complements recommended and contrasting readings by Brendel or Richter. The A minor, D845, is similarly resolute and yet subtly nuanced. *CB*

Sound Quality: 85%



NIGHTS IN VIENNA

VPO/Rudolf Kempe

Hi-Q Records HIQLP032

Rudolf Kempe deserves to be remembered for far more than his Richard Strauss – he had a wide discography. But asked which was his favourite recording he replied ‘Lehar’s *Gold and Silver*’. It’s here along with Suppé (*Poet and Peasant* – a lovely cello solo by Emanuel Brabec), Reznicek (*Donna Diana* – taken quite quickly), Heuberger (*Der Opernball*) and three pieces by the ‘other’ Strausses: *Die Fledermaus Ovt*; *Sphärenklänge*; *Radetsky March*. The last two are utter perfection! The programme was recorded in the Musikverein in 1958 but wears its years lightly: there’s a wide, well separated stereo staging. Silent pressings and proper dividing scrolls. *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%



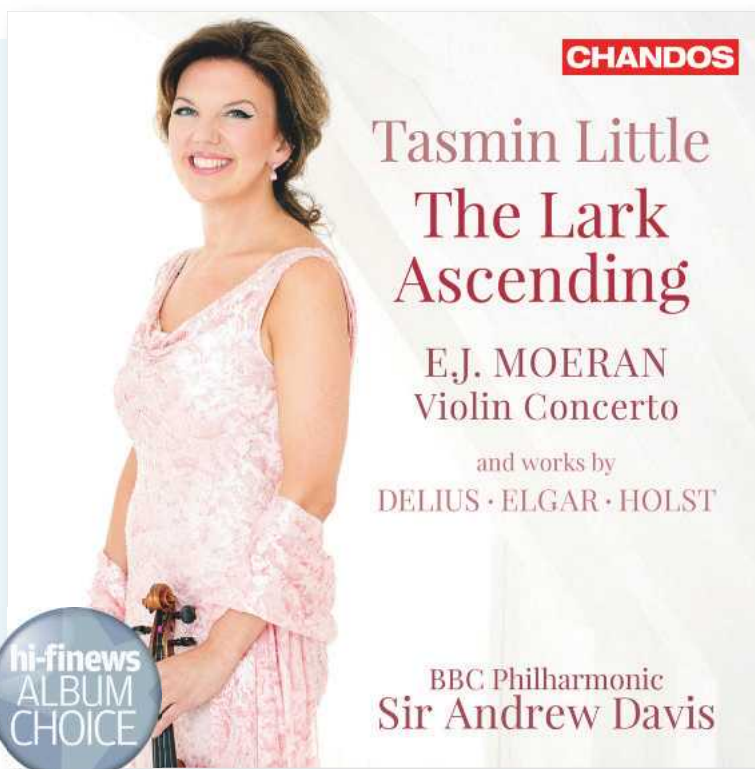
THE LARK ASCENDING

Tasmin Little, BBC PO/Sir Andrew Davis

Chandos CHAN 10796; downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit

Tasmin Little returns to even greater effect to Vaughan Williams’s *The Lark Ascending* than in her Warner Apex version (also with Sir Andrew Davis, 1990) and in this varied programme – with the EJ Moeran Violin Concerto (1942), three rather needless Elgar transcriptions (*Chanson de Matin*, *Chanson de Nuit*, *Salut d’Amour*), and pieces by Delius (*Légende*) and Holst (*A Song of the Night*) – she seems to change chameleon-like to the needs of each piece. The Moeran, a rhapsodic evocation of Irish life and landscapes is the major work here and receives an ideal performance. It’s well worth getting to know. All the accompaniments are sensitively balanced under Sir Andrew, with good sound from MediaCity Salford. *CB*

Sound Quality: 95%



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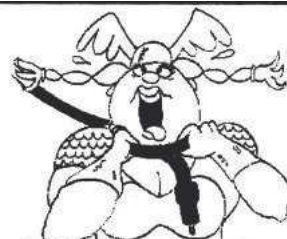
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Hi-Fi News is a member of the
Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC)
and of EISA (www.eisa-awards.org)

HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW, ISSN 2042-0374, is published monthly with an additional issue in January by AVTech Media Ltd, a division of MYTIMEMEDIA Ltd, Enterprise House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent TN8 6HF, UK. The US annual subscription price is 65GBP (equivalent to approximately 108USD). Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named Air Business Ltd, c/o Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Jamaica NY 11431. US Postmaster: Send address changes to HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW, Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Subscription records are maintained at CDS GLOBAL Ltd, Tower House, Sovereign Park, Market Harborough, Leicestershire, LE16 9EF. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.



LAST WORD

OFF THE LEASH!

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

It's been a watershed year for the way we listen to music, if not for hi-fi itself, says **Ken Kessler**

Anual round-ups test a writer's fictional skills: it is our duty to make even dull years sound exciting. But high-end audio has the same bright outlook as film cameras and typewriters, and however much passion you or I may retain for top quality sound we are mammoths who refuse to acknowledge the current Ice Age.

Even more dispiriting is that the latest crop of audio components with Mercedes-esque prices, while genuinely staggering in their performance capabilities, do not set our world alight. When is the last time we had a 'paradigm shift' to match the Quad '57, the first Krell power amp, the arrival of Koetsu? Sadly, our last paradigm shift was the arrival of digital playback in the home, and all that got us was convenience, and the ability to carry one's entire library on a memory stick.

THE LAST CRY

Few will use such a dramatic term as paradigm shift, coined by physicist Thomas Kuhn, to ascribe the move from stored music to streaming, even though it is as huge a change as any in how we (or our children) listen to music or watch films. The day before writing this, the CEA newsletter (from the organisers of CES) confirmed the pending arrival of 4K Blu-ray in 2015, as the bulwark against video streaming, which is yet to be

as fluid or as high def as a physical carrier. Still, I suspect that whoever is writing this page in ten years will see 4K as the *dernier cri* of disc formats.

FUTURE SIGNIFIERS

Whatever transpires, an equally important event for the calendar year of 2014 has yet to take place as this is being written. Note that I said 'important' but not necessarily the most-welcomed, nor likely to rank with the birth of the SME 3009 tonearm in 1961 or the LS3/5A circa 1976. Some weeks after this issue hits the newsstands, provided there are no unforeseen disasters, the very first Pono music players should be reaching their intended homes.

It's not just the Pono player that I'm about to hold up as a signifier of 2014 for future historians. This honour must be shared with the Geek USB DAC/headphone amp from the folks who produce the stupidly-expensive Light Harmonic DACs.

(I use the word 'stupidly' because we no longer live in a world awash with rich guys eager to buy high-end audio components with five-figure price tags. They've moved on to watches, wine, property, art and other toys that don't depreciate.)

What Pono and Geek have in common is the crowdfunding that paid for their creation. While this has nothing whatsoever

to do with sound quality, it speaks volumes for the way that hi-fi start-ups will take place in the future. This is not to say that all will be successful, and I won't embarrass those who tried to emulate Geek or Pono and failed, but the implications are huge.

I don't know if Pono is wonderful or dreck at this stage, but I do have ears-on experience of the Geek, and it is a mighty fine product. Equally, I have no idea at all if the Geek would have reached production without the money it received via Kickstarter. What's so noteworthy is that the company found 2,146 backers who pledged \$303,061 against a \$28,000 goal. At ten times the target, that's amazing.

And Pono? Thanks in no small part to the role of Neil Young, this wannabee-iPod killer inspired 18,220 backers to, er, pony up \$6,225,354 in pledges to better a goal of \$800,000. According to Kickstarter, it's the third most-successful funding project yet for the site... for an audio device.

What's the point of all this? It shows, whether or not it manifests itself in the marketplace, that innovative music-reproduction gear still causes ripples, if not full-blown tsunamis. If you add to the mix the now-viable boon that is 3D printing, which arrived in truly affordable form this past year, you can see how 2014 might be remembered for changing the rules of both manufacture and playback.

ENJOY IT

Personal highlights? On the music side, I must cite the releases of *The Beatles In Mono* LP box-set and the deluxe sets for the first three Led Zeppelin albums. In the budget sector, I was knocked out by Musical Fidelity's MF100 headphones and Pro-Ject's MaiA integrated amplifier. Money no object? The D'Agostino Momentum Integrated for being so over-the-top and (literally) off the scales. And to bring us back to the real world, HDtracks' download service is finally offered in the UK.

Was 2014 a good year? Let's just say that so far it hasn't been memorable, but it certainly hasn't been dreadful. We're still here, and still listening to music. There are parts of the world where hi-fi is unnecessary because music is banned. So enjoy it. ☺

'It speaks volumes for the way that hi-fi start-ups will take place in the future'

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